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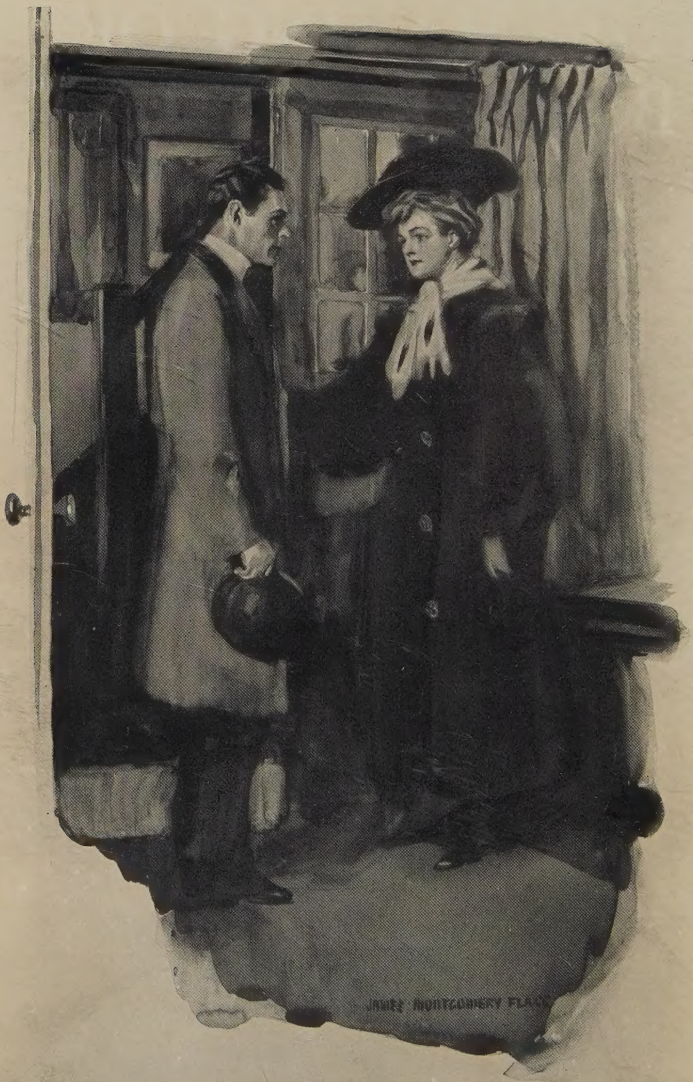

Will you if I get my father's business back?

THE MAKING OF BOBBY BURNIT

Being a Record of the Adventures of a Live American Young Man

By

GEORGE RANDOLPH CHESTER

With Illustrations by
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DEDICATION

To the Handicapped Sons of Able
Fathers, and the Handicapped
Fathers of Able Sons,
with Sympathy for
each, and a
Smile for
both

THE MAKING OF BOBBY BURNIT

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CHAPTER I

BOBBY MAKES SOME IMPORTANT PREPARATIONS FOR A COMMERCIAL LIFE

"I AM profoundly convinced that my son is a fool," read the will of old John Burnit. "I am, however, also convinced that I allowed him to become so by too much absorption in my own affairs and too little in his, and, therefore, his being a fool is hereditary; consequently, I feel it my duty, first, to give him a fair trial at making his own way, and second, to place the balance of my fortune in such trust that he can not starve. The trusteeship is already created and the details are nobody's present business. My son Robert will take over the John Burnit Store and personally conduct it, as his only resource, without further question as to what else I may have left behind me. This is my last will and testament."

That is how cheerful Bobby Burnit, with no

thought heretofore above healthy amusements and 'Agnes Elliston, suddenly became a business man, after having been raised to become the idle heir to about three million. Of course, having no kith nor kin in all this wide world, he went immediately to consult 'Agnes. It is quite likely that if he had been supplied with dozens of uncles and aunts he would have gone first to 'Agnes anyhow, having a mighty regard for her keen judgment, even though her clear gaze rested now and then all too critically upon himself. Just as he came whirling up the avenue he saw Nick Allstyne's white car, several blocks ahead of him, stop at her door, and a figure which he knew must be Nick jump out and trip up the steps. 'Almost immediately the figure came down again, much more slowly, and climbed into the car, which whizzed away.

"Not at home," grumbled Bobby.

It was like him, however, that he should continue straight to the quaint old house of the Ellistons and proffer his own card, for, though his aims could seldom be called really worth while, he invariably finished the thing he set out to do. It seemed to be a sort of disease. He could not help it. To his surprise, the Cerberus who guarded the Elliston door received him with a smile and a bow, and observed:

"Miss Elliston says you are to walk right on up to the Turkish alcove, sir."

While Wilkins took his hat and coat Bobby paused for a moment figuratively to hug himself. At home to no one else! Expecting him!

"I'll ask her again," said Bobby to himself with determination, and stalked on up to the second floor hall, upon which opened a delightful cozy corner where Aunt Constance Elliston permitted the more "family-like" male callers to smoke and loll and be at mannish ease.

As he reached the landing the door of the library below opened, and in it appeared Agnes and an unusually well-set-up young man—a new one, who wore a silky mustache and most fastidious tailoring. The two were talking and laughing gaily as the door opened, but as Agnes glanced up and saw Bobby she suddenly stopped laughing, and he almost thought that he overheard her say something in an aside to her companion. The impression was but fleeting, however, for she immediately nodded brightly. Bobby bowed rather stiffly in return, and continued his ascent of the stairs with a less sprightly footstep. Crestfallen, and conscious that Agnes had again closed the door of the library without either herself or the strange visitor having emerged into the hall, he strode into the Turkish alcove and let himself drop upon a divan with a thump. He extracted a cigar from his cigar-case, carefully cut off the tip and as carefully

restored the cigar to its place. Then he clasped his interlocked fingers around his knee, and for the next ten minutes strove, like a gentleman, not to listen.

When Agnes came up presently she made no mention whatever of her caller, and, of course, Bobby had no excuse upon which to hang impertinent questions, though the sharp barbs of them were darting through and through him. Such fuming as he felt, however, was instantly allayed by the warm and thoroughly honest clasp she gave him when she shook hands with him. It was one of the twenty-two million things he liked about her that she did not shake hands like two ounces of cold fish, as did some of the girls he knew. She was dressed in a half-formal house-gown, and the one curl of her waving brown hair that would persistently straggle down upon her forehead was in its accustomed place. He had always been obsessed with a nearly irresistible impulse to put his finger through that curl.

"I have come around to consult you about a little business matter, Agnes," he found himself beginning with sudden breathlessness, his perturbation forgotten in the overwhelming charm of her. "The governor's will has just been read to me, and he's plunged me into a ripping mess. His whole fortune is in the hands of a trusteeship, whatever that is, and I'm not even to know the trustees. All I get is just the business, and

I'm to carry the John Burnit Store on from its present blue-ribbon standing to still more dazzling heights, I suppose. Well, I'd like to do it. The governor deserves it. But, you see, I'm so beastly thick-headed. Now, Agnes, you have perfectly stunning judgment and all that, so if you would just—" and he came to an abrupt and painful pause.

"Have you brought along the contract?" she asked demurely. "Honestly, Bobby, you're the most original person in the world. The first time, I was to marry you because you were so awkward, and the next time because your father thought so much of me, and another time because you wanted us to tour Norway and not have a whole bothersome crowd along; then you were tired living in a big, lonely house with just you and your father and the servants; now, it's an advantageous business arrangement. What share of the profits am I to receive?"

Bobby's face had turned red, but he stuck manfully to his guns.

"All of them," he blurted. "You know that none of those is the real reason," he as suddenly protested. "It is only that when I come to tell you the actual reason I rather choke up and can't."

"You're a mighty nice boy, Bobby," she confessed. "Now sit down and behave, and tell me just what you have decided to do."

"Well," said he, accepting his defeat with great philosophy, since he had no reason to regard it as final, "of course, my decision is made for me. I'm to take hold of the business. I don't know anything about it, but I don't see why it shouldn't go straight on as it always has."

"Possibly," she admitted thoughtfully; "but I imagine your father expected you to have rather a difficult time of it. Perhaps he wants you to, so that a defeat or two will sting you into having a little more serious purpose in life than you have at present. I'd like, myself, to see you handle, with credit to him and to you, the splendid establishment he built up."

"If I do," Bobby wanted to know, "will you marry me?"

"That makes eleven times. I'm not saying, Bobby, but you never can tell."

"That settles it. I'm going to be a business man. Let me use your 'phone a minute." It was one of the many advantages of the delightfully informal Turkish alcove that it contained a telephone, and in two minutes Bobby had his tailors. "Make me two or three business suits," he ordered. "Regular business suits, I mean, for real business wear—you know the sort of thing—and get them done as quickly as you can, please. There!" said he as he hung up the receiver. "I shall begin to-morrow morning. I'll go

down early and take hold of the John Burnit Store in earnest."

"You've made a splendid start," commented Agnes, smiling. "Now tell me about the polo tournament," and she sat back to enjoy his enthusiasm over something about which he was entirely posted.

He was good to look at, was Bobby, with his clean-cut figure and his clean-cut face and his clean, blue eyes and clean complexion, and she delighted in nothing more than just to sit and watch him when he was at ease; he was so restful, so certain to be always telling the truth, to be always taking a charitably good-humored view of life, to turn on wholesome topics and wholesome points of view; but after he had gone she smiled and sighed and shook her head.

"Poor Bobby," she mused. "There won't be a shred left of his tender little fleece by the time he gets through."

One more monitor Bobby went to see that afternoon, and this was Biff Bates. It required no sending in of cards to enter the presence of this celebrity. One simply stepped out of the elevator and used one's latch-key. It was so much more convenient. Entering a big, barnlike room he found Mr. Bates, clad only in trunks and canvas shoes, wreaking dire punishment upon a punching-bag merely by way of amusement; and Mr. Bates, with every symptom of joy illumi-

nating his rather horizontal features—wide brows, wide cheek-bone, wide nose, wide mouth, wide chin, wide jaw—stopped to shake hands most enthusiastically with his caller without removing his padded glove.

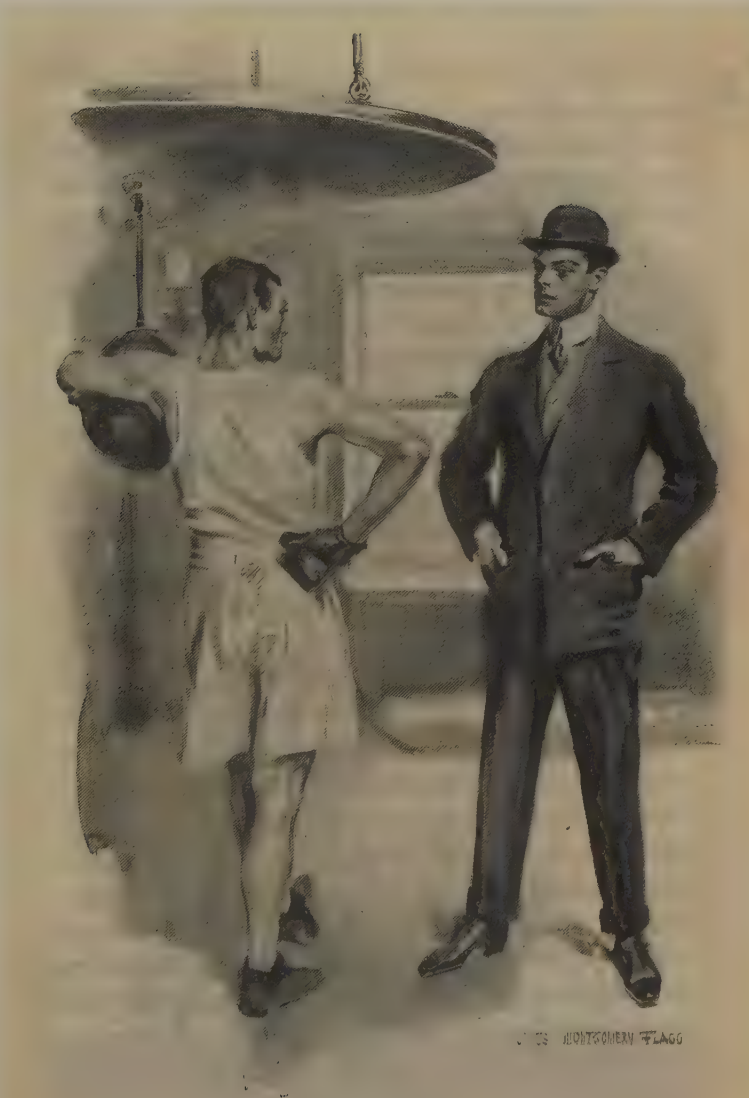
"What's the good news, old pal?" he asked huskily.

He was half a head shorter than Bobby and four inches broader across the shoulders, and his neck spread out over all the top of his torso; but there was something in the clear gaze of the eyes which made the two gentlemen look quite alike as they shook hands, vastly different as they were.

"Bad news for you, I'm afraid," announced Bobby. "That little partnership idea of the big gymnasium will have to be called off for a while."

Mr. Bates took a contemplative punch or two at the still quivering bag.

"It was a fake, anyway," he commented, putting his arm around the top of the punching-bag and leaning against it comfortably; "just like this place. You went into partnership with me on this joint—that is, you put up the coin and run in a lot of your friends on me to be trained up—squarest lot of sports I ever saw, too. You fill the place with business and allow me a weekly envelope that makes me tilt my chin till I have to wear my lid down over my eyes to keep it from falling off the back of my head, and



They'll double-cross you, though, to a fare-ye-well

when there's profits to split up you shoves mine into my mitt and puts yours into improvements. You put in the new shower baths and new bars and traps, and the last thing, that swimming-tank back there. I'm glad the big game's off. I'm so contented now I'm getting over-weight, and you'd bilk me again. But what's the matter? Did the bookies get you?"

"No; I'll tell you all about it," and Bobby carefully explained the terms of his father's will and what they meant.

Mr. Bates listened carefully, and when the explanation was finished he thought for a long time.

"Well, Bobby," said he, "here's where you get it. They'll shred you clean. You're too square for that game. Your old man was a fine old sport and *he* played it on the level, but, say, he could see a marked card clear across a room. They'll double-cross you, though, to a fare-ye-well."

The opinion seemed to be unanimous.

CHAPTER II

PINK CARNATIONS APPEAR IN THE OFFICE OF THE JOHN BURNIT STORE

BOBBY gave his man orders to wake him up early next morning, say not later than eight, and prided himself very much upon his energy when, at ten-thirty, he descended from his machine in front of the old and honored establishment of John Burnit, and, leaving instructions for his chauffeur to call for him at twelve, made his way down the long aisles of white-piled counters and into the dusty little office where old Johnson, thin as a rail and with a face like whittled chalk, humped over his desk exactly as he had sat for the past thirty-five years.

"Good-morning, Johnson," observed Bobby with an affable nod. "I've come to take over the business."

He said it in the same untroubled tone he had always used in asking for his weekly check, and Johnson looked up with a wry smile. Applerod, on the contrary, was beaming with hearty admiration. He was as florid as Johnson was colorless, and the two had

rubbed elbows and dispositions in that same room almost since the house of Burnit had been founded.

"Very well, sir," grudged Johnson, and immediately laid upon the time-blackened desk which had been old John Burnit's, a closely typewritten statement of some twenty pages. On top of this he placed a plain gray envelope addressed:

To My Son Robert,
Upon the Occasion of His Taking Over the Business

Upon this envelope Bobby kept his eyes in mild speculation, while he leisurely laid aside his cane and removed his gloves and coat and hat; next he sat down in his father's jerky old swivel chair and lit a cigarette; then he opened the letter. He read:

"Every business needs a pessimist and an optimist, with ample opportunities to quarrel. Johnson is a jackass, but honest. He is a pessimist and has a pea-green liver. Listen to him and the business will die painlessly, by inches. Applerod is also a jackass, and I presume him to be honest; but I never tested it. He suffers from too much health, and the surplus goes into optimism. Listen to him and the business will die in horrible agony, quickly. But keep both of them. Let them fight things out until they come almost to an understanding, then take the middle course."

That was all. Bobby turned squarely to survey the frowning Johnson and the still beaming Applerod, and with a flash of clarity he saw his father's wisdom. He had always admired John Burnit, aside from the fact that the sturdy pioneer had been his father, had admired him much as one admires the work of a master magician—without any hope of emulation. As he read the note he could seem to see the old gentleman standing there with his hands behind him, ready to stretch on tiptoe and drop to his heels with a thump as he reached a climax, his spectacles shoved up on his forehead, his strong, wrinkled face stern from the cheek-bones down, but twinkling from that line upward, the twinkle, which had its seat about the shrewd eyes, suddenly terminating in a sharp, whimsical, little up-pointed curl in the very middle of his forehead. To corroborate his warm memory Bobby opened the front of his watch-case, where the same face looked him squarely in the eyes. Naturally, then, he opened the other lid, where Agnes Elliston's face smiled up at him. Suddenly he shut both lids with a snap and turned, with much distaste but with a great show of energy, to the heavy statement which had all this time confronted him. The first page he read over laboriously, the second one he skimmed through, the third and fourth he leafed over; and then he skipped to the

last sheet, where was set down a concise statement of the net assets and liabilities.

"According to this," observed Bobby with great show of wisdom, "I take over the business in a very flourishing condition."

"Well," grudgingly admitted Mr. Johnson, "it might be worse."

"It could hardly be better," interposed Applerod—"that is, without the extensions and improvements that I think your father would have come in time to make. Of course, at his age he was naturally a bit conservative."

"Mr. Applerod and myself have never agreed upon that point," wheezed Johnson sharply. "For my part I considered your father—well, scarcely reckless, but, say, sufficiently daring! Daring is about the word."

Bobby grinned cheerfully.

"He let the business go rather by its own weight, didn't he?"

Both gentlemen shook their heads, instantly and most emphatically.

"He certainly must have," insisted Bobby. "As I recollect it, he only worked up here, of late years, from about eleven fifty-five to twelve every other Thursday."

"Oftener than that," solemnly corrected the literal

Mr. Johnson. "He was here from eleven until twelve-thirty every day."

"What did he do?"

It was Applerod who, with keen appreciation, hastened to advise him upon this point.

"Said 'yes' twice and 'no' twelve times. Then, at the very last minute, when we thought that he was through, he usually landed on a proposition that hadn't been put up to him at all, and put it clear out of the business."

"Looks like good finessing to me," said Bobby complacently. "I think I shall play it that way."

"It wouldn't do, sir," Mr. Johnson replied in a tone of keen pain. "You must understand that when your father started this business it was originally a little fourteen-foot-front place, one story high. He got down here at six o'clock every morning and swept out. As he got along a little further he found that he could trust somebody else with that job—*but he always knew how to sweep.* It took him a lifetime to simmer down his business to just 'yes' and 'no.'"

"I see," mused Bobby; "and I'm expected to take that man's place! How would you go about it?"

"I would suggest, without meaning any impertinence whatever, sir," insinuated Mr. Johnson, "that if you were to start clerking——"

"Or sweeping out at six o'clock in the morning?" calmly interrupted Bobby. "I don't like to stay up so late. No, Johnson, about the only thing I'm going to do to show my respect for the traditions of the house is to leave this desk just as it is, and hang an oil portrait of my father over it. And, by the way, isn't there some little side room where I can have my office? I'm going into this thing very earnestly."

Mr. Johnson and Mr. Applerod exchanged glances.

"The door just to the right there," said Mr. Johnson, "leads to a room which is at present filled with old files of the credit department. No doubt those could be moved somewhere else."

Bobby walked into that room and gaged its possibilities. It was a little small, to be sure, but it would do for the present.

"Just have that cleared out and a 'phone put in. I'll get right down to business this afternoon and see about the fittings for it." Then he looked at his watch once more. "By George!" he exclaimed, "I almost forgot that I was to see Nick Allstyne at the Idlers' Club about that polo match. Just have one of your boys stand out at the curb along about twelve, will you, and tell my chauffeur to report at the club."

Johnson eyed the closed door over his spectacles.

"He'll be having blue suits and brass buttons on us two next," he snorted.

"He don't mean it at all that way," protested Applerod. "For my part, I think he's a fine young fellow."

"I'll give you to understand, sir," retorted Johnson, violently resenting this imputed defection, "that he is the son of his father, and for that, if for nothing else, would have my entire allegiance."

Bobby, meanwhile, feeling very democratic and very much a man of affairs, took a street-car to the Idlers', and strode through the classic portals of that club with gravity upon his brow. Flaxen-haired Nick Allstyne, standing by the registry desk, turned to dark Payne Winthrop with a nod.

"You win," he admitted. "I'll have to charge it up to you, Bobby. I just lost a quart of the special to Payne that since you'd become immersed in the cares of business you'd not be here."

Bobby was almost austere in his reception of this slight.

"Don't you know," he demanded, "that there is nobody who keeps even his social engagements like a business man?"

"That's what I gambled on," returned Payne confidentially, "but I wasn't sure just how much of a business man you'd become. Nick, don't you already seem to see a crease in Bobby's brow?"

"No, that's his regular polo crease," objected lanky

Stanley Rogers, joining them, and the four of them fell upon polo as one man. Their especially anxious part in the tournament was to be a grinding match against Willie Ashler's crack team, and the point of worry was that so many of their fellows were out of town. They badly needed one more good player.

"I have it," declared Bobby finally. It was he who usually decided things in this easy-going, athletic crowd. "We'll make Jack Starlett play, but the only way to get him is to go over to Washington after him. Payne, you're to go along. You always keep a full set of regalia here at the club, I know. Here, boy!" he called to a passing page. "Find out for us the next two trains to Washington."

"Yes, sir," said the boy with a grin, and was off like a shot. They had a strict rule against tipping in the Idlers', but if he happened to meet Bobby outside, say at the edge of the curb where his car was standing, there was no rule against his receiving something there. Besides, he liked Bobby, anyhow. They all did. He was back in a moment.

"One at two-ten and one at four-twenty, sir."

"The two-ten sounds about right," announced Bobby. "Now, Billy, telephone to my apartments to have my Gladstone and my dress-suit togs brought down to that train. Then, by the way, telephone Leatherby and Pluscher to send up to my place of

business and have Mr. Johnson show their man my new office. Have him take measurements of it and fit it up at once, complete. They know the kind of things I like. Really, fellows," he continued, turning to the others, after he had patiently repeated and explained his instructions to the foggy but willing Billy, "I'm in serious earnest about this thing. Up to me, you know, to do credit to the governor, if I can."

"Bobby, the Boy Bargain Baron," observed Nick. "Well, I guess you can do it. All you need to do is to take hold, and I'll back you at any odds."

"We'll all put a bet on you," encouraged Stanley Rogers. "More, we'll help. We'll all get married and send our wives around to open accounts with you."

In spite of the serious business intentions, the luncheon which followed was the last the city saw of Bobby Burnit for three days. Be it said to his credit that he had accomplished his purpose when he returned. He had brought reluctant Jack Starlett back with him, and together they walked into the John Burnit Store.

"New office fitted up yet, Johnson?" asked Bobby pleasantly.

"Yes, sir," replied Johnson sourly. "Just a moment, Mr. Burnit," and from an index cabinet back

of him he procured an oblong gray envelope which he handed to Bobby. It was inscribed:

To My Son,
Upon the Fitting-Out of New Offices

With a half-embarrassed smile, Bobby regarded that letter thoughtfully and carried it into the luxurious new office. He opened it and read it, and, still with that queer smile, passed it over to Starlett. This was old John Burnit's message:

"I have seen a business work up to success, and afterward add velvet rugs and dainty flowers on the desk, but I never saw a successful business start that way."

Bobby looked around him with a grin. There *was* a velvet rug on the floor. There were no flowers upon the mahogany desk, but there *was* a vase to receive them. For just one moment he was nonplussed; then he opened the door leading to the dingy apartment occupied by Messrs. Johnson and Applerod.

"Mr. Johnson," said he, "will you kindly send out and get two dozen pink carnations for my room?"

Quiet, big Jack Starlett, having loaded and lit and taken the first long puff, removed his pipe from his lips.

"Bully!" said he.

CHAPTER III

OLD JOHN BURNIT'S ANCIENT ENEMY POINTS OUT THE WAY TO GRANDEUR

MR. JOHNSON had no hair in the very center of his head, but, when he was more than usually vexed, he ran his fingers through what was left upon both sides of the center and impatiently pushed it up toward a common point. His hair was in that identical condition when he knocked at the door of Bobby's office and poked in his head to announce Mr. Silas Trimmer.

"Trimmer," mused Bobby. "Oh, yes; he is the John Burnit Store's chief competitor; concern backs up against ours, fronting on Market Street. Show him in, Johnson."

Jack Starlett, who had dropped in to loaf a bit, rose to go.

"Sit down," insisted Bobby. "I'm conducting this thing all open and aboveboard. You know, I think I shall like business."

"They tell me it's the greatest game out," commented Starlett, and just then Mr. Trimmer entered.

He was a little, wiry man as to legs and arms, but fearfully rotund as to paunch, and he had a yellow leather face and black eyes which, though gleaming like beads, seemed to have a muddy cast. Bobby rose to greet him with a cordiality in no degree abashed by this appearance.

"And what can we do for you, Mr. Trimmer?" he asked after the usual inanities of greeting had been exchanged.

"Take lunch with me," invited Mr. Trimmer, endeavoring to beam, his heavy, down-drooping gray mustache remaining immovable in front of the deeply-chiseled smile that started far above the corners of his nose and curved around a display of yellow teeth. "I have just learned that you have taken over the business, and I wish as quickly as possible to form with the son the same cordial relations which for years I enjoyed with the father."

Bobby looked him contemplatively in the eye, but had no experience upon which to base a picture of his father and Mr. Trimmer enjoying perpetually cordial relations with a knife down each boot leg.

"Very sorry, Mr. Trimmer, but I am engaged for lunch."

"Dinner, then—at the Traders' Club," insisted Mr. Trimmer, who never for any one moment had remained entirely still, either his foot or his hand

moving, or some portion of his body twitching almost incessantly.

Inwardly Bobby frowned, for, so far, he had found no points about his caller to arouse his personal enthusiasm; and yet it suddenly occurred to him that here was doubtless business, and that it ought to have attention. His father, under similar circumstances, would find out what the man was after. He cast a hesitating glance at his friend.

"Don't mind me, Bobby," said Starlett briskly. "You know I shall be compelled to take dinner with the folks to-night."

"At about what time, Mr. Trimmer?" Bobby asked.

"Oh, suit yourself. Any time," responded that gentleman eagerly. "Say half-past six."

"The Traders'," mused Bobby. "I think the governor put me up there four or five years ago."

"I seconded you," the other informed him; "and I had the pleasure of voting for you just the other day, on the vacancy made by your father. You're a full-fledged member now."

"Fine!" said Bobby. "Business suit or——"

"Anything you like." With again that circular smile behind his immovable mustache, Mr. Trimmer backed out of the room, and Bobby, dropping into a chair, turned perplexed eyes upon his friend.

"What do you suppose he wants?" he inquired.

"Your eye-teeth," returned Jack bluntly. "He looks like a mucker to me."

"Oh, I don't know," returned Bobby, a trifle uneasily. "You see, Jack, he isn't exactly our sort, and maybe we can't get just the right angle in judging him. He's been nailed down to business all his life, you know, and a fellow in that line don't have a chance, as I take it, to cultivate all the little—well, say artificial graces."

"Your father wasn't like him. He was as near a thoroughbred as I ever saw, Bobby, and he was nailed down, as you put it, all *his* life."

"Oh, you couldn't expect them all to be like the governor," responded Bobby instantly, shocked at the idea. "But this chap may be no end of a good sort in his style. No doubt at all he merely came over in a friendly way to bid me a sort of welcome into the fraternity of business men," and Bobby felt quite a little thrill of pride in that novel idea. "By George! Wait a minute," he exclaimed as still another brilliant thought struck him, and going into the other room he said to Johnson: "Please give me the letter addressed: 'To My Son Robert, Upon the Occasion of Mr. Trimmer's First Call.'"

For the first time in days a grin irradiated Johnson's face.

"Nothing here, sir," he replied.

"Let me go through that file."

"Strictly against orders, sir," said Johnson.

"Indeed," responded Bobby quizzically; "I don't like to press the bet, Johnson, but really I'd like to know who has the say here."

"You have, sir, over everything except my private affairs; and that letter file is my private property and its contents my private trusteeship."

"I can still take my castor oil like a little man, if I have to," Bobby resignedly observed. "I remember that when I was a kiddy the governor once undertook to teach me mathematics, and he never would let me see the answers. More than ever it looks like it was up to Bobby," and whistling cheerfully he walked back into his private office.

Johnson turned to Applerod with a snarl.

"Mr. Applerod," said he, "you know that I almost never swear. I am now about to do so. Darn it! It's a shame that Trimmer calls here again on that old scheme about which he deviled this house for years, and we forbidden to give Mr. Robert a word of advice unless he asks for it."

"Why is it a shame?" demanded Applerod. "I always have thought that Trimmer's plan was a great one."

So, all unprepared, Bobby went forth that evening, to become acquainted with the great plan.

At the restless Traders' Club, where the precise corridors and columns and walls and ceilings of white marble were indicative of great formality, men with creases in their brows wore their derbies on the backs of their heads and ceaselessly talked shop. Mr. Trimmer, more creased of brow than any of them, was drifting from group to group with his eyes turned anxiously toward the door until Bobby came in. Mr. Trimmer was most effusively glad to see the son of his old friend once again, and lost no time in seating him at a most secluded table, where, by the time the oysters came on, he was deep in a catalogue of the virtues of John Burnit; and Bobby, with a very real and a very deep affection for his father which seldom found expression in words, grew restive. One thing held him, aside from his obligations as a guest. He was convinced now that his host's kindness was in truth a mere graceful act of welcome, due largely to his father's standing, and the idea flattered him very much. He strove to look as businesslike as possible, and thought again and again upon his father; of how he had sat day after day in this stately dining-hall, honored and venerated among these men who were striving still for the ideal that he had attained. It was a good thought, and made for pride of the right sort. With the entrée Mr. Trimmer ordered his favorite vintage champagne, and, as it boiled up

like molten amber in the glasses, so sturdily that the center of the surface kept constantly a full quarter of an inch above the sides, he waited anxiously for Bobby to sample it. Even Bobby, long since disillusioned of such things and grown abstemious from healthy choice, after a critical taste sipped slowly again and again.

"That's ripping good wine," he acknowledged.

"There's only a little over two hundred bottles of it left in the world," Mr. Trimmer assured him, and then he waited for that first glass to exert its warming glow. He was a good waiter, was Silas Trimmer, and keenly sensitive to personal influences. He knew that Bobby had not been in entire harmony with him at any period of the evening, but after the roast came on — a most careful roast, indeed, prepared under a certain formula upon which Mr. Trimmer had painstakingly insisted—he saw that he had really found his way for a moment to Bobby's heart through the channel provided by Nature for attacks upon masculine sympathy, and at that moment he leaned forward with his circular smile, and observed:

"By the way, Mr. Burnit, I suppose your father often discussed with you the great plan we evolved for the Burnet-Trimmer Arcade?"

Bobby almost blushed at the confession he must make.

"I'm sorry to say that he didn't," he owned. "I never took the interest in such things that I ought, and so I missed a lot of confidences I'd like to have had now."

"Too bad," sympathized Mr. Trimmer, now quite sure of his ground, since he had found that Bobby was not posted. "It was a splendid plan we had. You know, your building and mine are precisely the same width and precisely in a line with each other, back to back, with only the alley separating us, the Trimmer establishment fronting on Market Street and the Burnit building on Grand. The alley is fully five feet below our two floor lines, and we could, I am quite sure, get permission to bridge it at a clearance of not to exceed twelve feet. By raising the rear departments of your store and of mine a foot or so, and then building a flight of broad, easy steps up and down, we could almost conceal the presence of this bridge from the inside, and make one immense establishment running straight through from Grand to Market Streets. The floors above the first, of course, would bridge over absolutely level, and the combined stores would comprise by far the largest establishment in the city. Of course, the advantage of it from an advertising standpoint alone would be well worth while."

Bobby could instantly see the almost interminable

length of store area thus presented, and it appealed to his sense of big things at once.

"What did father say about this?" he asked.

"Thought it a brilliant idea," glibly returned Mr. Trimmer. "In fact, I think it was he who first suggested such a possibility, seeing very clearly the increased trade and the increased profits that would accrue from such an extension, which would, in fact, be simply the doubling of our already big stores without additional capitalization. We worked out two or three plans for the consolidation, but in the later years your father was very slow about making actual extensions or alterations in his merchandising business, preferring to expend his energies on his successful outside enterprises. I feel sure, however, that he would have come to it in time, for the development is so logical, so much in keeping with the business methods of the times."

Here again was insidious flattery, the insinuation that Bobby must be thoroughly aware of "the business methods of the times."

"Of course, the idea is new to me," said Bobby, assuming as best he could the air of business reserve which seemed appropriate to the occasion; "but I should say, in a general way, that I should not care to give up the identity of the John Burnit Store."

"That is a fine and a proper spirit," agreed Mr.

Trimmer, with great enthusiasm. "I like to see it in a young man, but I've no doubt that we can arrange that little matter. Of course, we would have to incorporate, say, as the Burnit-Trimmer Mercantile Corporation, but while having that name on the front of both buildings, it might not be a bad idea, for business as well as sentimental reasons, to keep the old signs at the tops of both, just as they now are. Those are little details to discuss later; but as the stock of the new company, based upon the present invoice values of our respective concerns, would be practically all in your hands and mine, this would be a very amicable and easily arranged matter. I tell you, Mr. Burnit, this is a tremendous plan, attractive to the public and immensely profitable to us, and I do not know of anything you could do that would so well as this show you to be a worthy successor to John Burnit; for, of course, it would scarcely be a credit to you to carry on your father's business without change or advance."

It was the best and the most crafty argument Mr. Trimmer had used, and Bobby carried away from the Traders' Club a glowing impression of this point. His father had built up this big business by his own unaided efforts. Should Bobby leave that legacy just where he had found it, or should he carry it on to still greater heights? The answer was obvious.

CHAPTER IV

AGNES EMPHATICALLY DECIDES THAT SHE DOES NOT LIKE A CERTAIN PERSON

AT the theater that evening, Bobby, to his vexation, found Agnes Elliston walking in the promenade foyer with the well-set-up stranger. He passed her with a nod and slipped moodily into the rear of the Elliston box, where Aunt Constance, perennially young, was entertaining Nick Allstyne and Jack Starlett, and keeping them at a keen wit's edge, too. Bobby gave them the most perfunctory of greetings, and, sitting back by himself, sullenly moped. He grumbled to himself that he had a headache; the play was a humdrum affair; Trimmer was a bore; the proposed consolidation had suddenly lost its prismatic coloring; the Traders' Club was crude; Starlett and Allstyne were utterly frivolous. All this because Agnes was out in the foyer with a very likely-looking young man.

She did not return until the end of that act, and found Bobby ready to go, pleading early morning business.

"Is it important?" she asked.

"Who's the chap with the silky mustache?" he suddenly demanded, unable to forbear any longer. "He's a new one."

The eyes of Agnes gleamed mischievously.

"Bobby, I'm astonished at your manners," she chided him. "Now tell me what you've been doing with yourself."

"Trying to grow up into John Burnit's truly son," he told her with some trace of pompous pride, being ready in advance to accept his rebuke meekly, as he always had to do, and being quite ready to cover up his grievous error with a change of topic. "I had no idea that business could so grip a fellow. But what I'd like to find out just now is who is my trustee? It must have been somebody with horse sense, or the governor would not have appointed whoever it was. I'm not going to ask anything I'm forbidden to know, but I want some advice. Now, how shall I learn who it is?"

"Well," replied Agnes thoughtfully, "about the only plan I can suggest is that you ask your father's legal and business advisers."

He positively beamed down at her.

"You're the dandy girl, all right," he said admiringly. "Now, if you would only——"

"Bobby," she interrupted him, "do you know that

we are standing up here in a box, with something like a thousand people, possibly, turned in our direction?"

He suddenly realized that they were alone, the others having filed out into the promenade, and, placing a chair for her in the extreme rear corner of the box, where he could fence her off, sat down beside her. He began to describe to her the plan of Silas Trimmer, and as he went on his enthusiasm mounted. The thing had caught his fancy. If he could only increase the profits of the John Burnit Store in the very first year, it would be a big feather in his cap. It would be precisely what his father would have desired! Agnes listened attentively all through the fourth act to his glowing conception of what the reorganized John Burnit Company would be like. He was perfectly contented now. His headache was gone; such occasional glimpses as he caught of the play were delightful; Mr. Trimmer was a genius; the Traders' Club a fascinating introduction to a new life; Starlett and Allstyne a joyous relief to him after the sordid cares of business. In a word, Agnes was with him.

"Do you think your father would accept this proposition?" she asked him after he was all through.

"I think he would at my age," decided Bobby promptly.

"That is, if he had been brought up as you have,"

she laughed. "I think I should study a long time over it, Bobby, before I made any such important and sweeping change as this must necessarily be."

"Oh, yes," he agreed with an assumption of deep conservatism; "of course I'll think it over well, and I'll take good, sound advice on it."

"I have never seen Mr. Trimmer," mused Agnes. "I seldom go into his store, for there always seems to me something shoddy about the whole place; but to-morrow I think I shall make it a point to secure a glimpse of him."

Bobby was delighted. Agnes had always been interested in whatever interested him, but never so absorbedly so as now, it seemed. He almost forgot the stranger in his pleasure. He forgot him still more when, dismissing his chauffeur, he seated Agnes in the front of the car beside him, with Starlett and Allstyne and Aunt Constance in the tonneau, and went whirling through the streets and up the avenue. It was but a brief trip, not over a half-hour, and they had scarcely a chance to exchange a word; but just to be up front there alone with her meant a whole lot to Bobby.

Afterward he took the other fellows down to the gymnasium, where Biff Bates drew him to one side.

"Look here, old pal!" said Bates. "I saw you real chummy with T. W. Tight-Wad Trimmer to-night."

"Yes?" admitted Bobby interrogatively.

"Well, you know I don't go around with my hammer out, but I want to put you wise to this mut. He's in with a lot of political graft, for one thing, and he's a sure thing guy for another. He likes to take a flyer at the bangtails a few times a season, and last summer he welshed on Joe Poog's book; claimed Joe misunderstood his fingers for two thousand in place of two hundred."

"Well, maybe there was a mistake," said Bobby, loath to believe such a monstrous charge against any one whom he knew.

"Mistake nawthin'," insisted Biff. "Joe Poog don't take finger bets for hundreds, and Trimmer never did bet that way. He's a born welsher, anyhow. He looks the part, and I just want to tell you, Bobby, that if you go to the mat with this crab you'll get up with the marks of his pinchers on your windpipe; that's all."

Early the next morning—that is, at about ten o'clock—Bobby bounced energetically into the office of Barrister and Coke, where old Mr. Barrister, who had been his father's lawyer for a great many years, received him with all the unbending grace of an ebony cane.

"I have come to find out who were the trustees appointed by my father, Mr. Barrister," began Bobby,

with a cheerful air of expecting to be informed at once, "not that I wish to inquire about the estate, but that I need some advice on entirely different matters."

"I shall be glad to serve you with any legal advice that you may need," offered Mr. Barrister, patting his finger-tips gently together.

"Are you the trustee?"

"No, sir"—this with a dusty smile.

"Who is, then?"

"The only information which I am at liberty to give you upon that point," said Mr. Barrister drily, "is that contained in your father's will. Would you care to examine a copy of that document again?"

"No, thanks," declined Bobby politely. "It's too truthful for comfort."

From there he went straight to his own place of business, where he asked the same question of Johnson. In reply, Mr. Johnson produced, from his own personal and private index-file, an oblong gray envelope addressed:

To My Son Robert,
Upon His Inquiring About the Trusteeship of
My Estate

Opening this in the privacy of his own office, Bobby read:

"As stated in my will, it is none of your present business."

"Up to Bobby again," the son commented aloud. "Well, Governor," and his shoulders straightened while his eyes snapped, "if you can stand it, I can. Hereafter I shall take my own advice, and if I lose I shall know how to find the chap who's to blame."

He had an opportunity to "go it alone" that very morning, when Johnson and Applerod came in to him together with a problem. Was or was not that Chicago branch to be opened? The elder Mr. Burnit had considered it most gravely, but had left the matter undecided. Mr. Applerod was very keenly in favor of it, Mr. Johnson as earnestly against it, and in his office they argued the matter with such heat that Bobby, accepting a typed statement of the figures in the case, virtually turned them out.

"When must you have a decision?" he demanded.

"To-morrow. We must wire either our acceptance or rejection of the lease."

"Very well," said Bobby, quite elated that he was carrying the thing off with an air and a tone so crisp; "just leave it to me, will you?"

He waded through the statement uncomprehendingly. Here was a problem which was covered and still not covered by his father's observations anent

Johnson and Applerod. It was a matter for wrangling, obviously enough, but there was no difference to split. It was a case of deciding either yes or no. For the balance of the time until Jack Starlett called for him at twelve-thirty, he puzzled earnestly and soberly over the thing, and next morning the problem still weighed upon him when he turned in at the office. He could see as he passed through the outer room that both Johnson and Applerod were furtively eying him, but he walked past them whistling. When he had closed his own door behind him he drew again that mass of data toward him and struggled against the chin-high tide. Suddenly he shoved the papers aside, and, taking a half-dollar from his pocket, flipped it on the floor. Eagerly he leaned over to look at it. Tails! With a sigh of relief he put the coin back in his pocket and lit a cigarette. About half an hour later the committee of two came solemnly in to see him.

"Have you decided to open the Chicago branch, sir?" asked Johnson.

"Not this year," said Bobby coolly, and handed back the data. "I wish, Mr. Johnson, you would appoint a page to be in constant attendance upon this room."

Back at their own desks Johnson gloated in calm triumph.

"It may be quite possible that Mr. Robert may turn out to be a duplicate of his father," he opined.

"I don't know," confessed Applerod, crestfallen. "I had thought that he would be more willing to take a sporting chance."

Mr. Johnson snorted. Mr. Applerod, who had never bet two dollars on any proposition in his life, considered himself very much of a sporting disposition.

Savagely in love with his new assertiveness Bobby called on Agnes that evening.

"I saw Mr. Trimmer to-day," she told him. "I don't like him."

"I didn't want you to," he replied with a grin. "You like too many people now."

"But I'm serious, Bobby," she protested, unconsciously clinging to his hand as they sat down upon the divan. "I wouldn't enter into any business arrangements with him. I don't know just what there is about him that repels me, but—well, I don't *like* him!"

"Can't say I've fallen in love with him myself," he replied. "But, Agnes, if a fellow only did business with the men his nearest women-folks liked, there wouldn't be much business done."

"There wouldn't be so many losses," she retorted.

"Bound to have the last word, of course," he an-

swered, taking refuge in that old and quite false slur against women in general; for a man suffers from his spleen if he can not put the quietus on every argument. "But, honestly, I don't fear Mr. Trimmer. I've been inquiring into this stock company business. We are each to have stock in the new company, if we form one, in exact proportion to the invoices of our respective establishments. Well, the Trimmer concern can't possibly invoice as much as we shall, and I'll have the majority of stock, which is the same as holding all the trumps. I had Mr. Barrister explain all that to me. With the majority of stock you can have everything your own way, and the other chap can't even protest. Seems sort of a shame, too."

"I don't like him," declared Agnes.

The ensuing week Bobby spent mostly on the polo match, though he called religiously at the office every morning, coming down a few minutes earlier each day. It was an uneasy week, too, as well as a busy one, for twice during its progress he saw Agnes driving with the unknown; and the fact that in both instances a handsome young lady was with them did not seem to mend matters much. He was astonished to find that losing the great polo match did not distress him at all. A year before it would have broken his heart, but the multiplicity of new interests had changed him entirely. As a matter of fact, he

had been long ripe for the change, though he had not known it. As he had matured, the blood of his heredity had begun to clamor for its expression; that was all.

At the beginning of the next week Mr. Trimmer came in to see him again, with a roll of drawings under his arm. The drawings displayed the proposed new bridge in elevation and in cross section. They showed the total stretch of altered store-rooms from street to street, and cleverly-drawn perspectives made graphically real that splendid length. They were accompanied by an estimate of the cost, and also by a permit from the city to build the bridge. With these were the preliminary papers for the organization of the new company, and Bobby, by this time intensely interested and convinced that his interest was business acumen, went over each detail with contracted brow and with kindling enthusiasm.

It was ten o'clock of that morning when Silas Trimmer had found Bobby at his desk; by eleven Mr. Johnson and Mr. Applerod, in the outer office, were quite unable to work; by twelve they were snarling at each other; at twelve-thirty Johnson ventured to poke his head in at the door, framing some trivial excuse as he did so, but found the two merchants with their heads bent closely over the advantages of the great combined stores. At a quarter-past one, return-

ing from a hasty lunch, Johnson tiptoed to the door again. He still heard an insistent, high-pitched voice inside. Mr. Trimmer was doing all the talking. He had explained and explained until his tongue was dry, and Bobby, with a full sense of the importance of his decision, was trying to clear away the fog that had grown up in his brain. Mr. Trimmer was pressing him for a decision. Bobby suddenly slipped his hand in his pocket, and, unseen, secured a half-dollar, which he shook in his hand under the table. Opening his palm he furtively looked at the coin. Heads!

"Get your papers ready, Mr. Trimmer," he announced, as one finally satisfied by good and sufficient argument, "we'll form the organization as soon as you like."

No sooner had he come to this decision than he felt a strange sense of elation. He had actually consummated a big business deal! He had made a positive step in the direction of carrying the John Burnit Store beyond the fame it had possessed at the time his father had turned it over to him! Since he had stiffened his back, he did not condescend to take Johnson and Applerod into his confidence, though those two gentlemen were quivering to receive it, but he did order Johnson to allow Mr. Trimmer's representatives to go over the John Burnit books and to verify their latest invoice, together with the purchases and

sales since the date of that stock-taking. To Mr. Applerod he assigned the task of making a like examination of the Trimmer establishment, and each day felt more like a really-truly business man. He affected the Traders' Club now, formed an entirely new set of acquaintances, and learned to go about the stately rooms of that magnificent business annex with his hat on the back of his head and creases in his brow.

Even before the final papers were completed, a huge gang of workmen, consisting of as many artisans as could be crowded on the job without standing on one another's feet, began to construct the elaborate bridge which was to connect the two stores, and Mr. Trimmer's publicity department was already securing column after column of space in the local papers, some of it paid matter and some gratis, wherein it appeared that the son of old John Burnit had proved himself to be a live, progressive young man — a worthy heir of so enterprising a father.

CHAPTER V

WHEREIN BOBBY ATTENDS A STOCK-HOLDERS' MEETING AND CUTS A WISDOM-TOOTH

WITHIN a very few days was completed the complicated legal machinery which threw the John Burnit Store and Trimmer and Company into the hands of "The Burnit-Trimmer Merchandise Corporation" as a holding and operating concern. The John Burnit Store went into that consolidation at an invoice value of two hundred and sixty thousand dollars, Trimmer and Company at two hundred and forty thousand; and Bobby was duly pleased. He had the majority of stock! On the later suggestion of Mr. Trimmer, however, sixty thousand dollars of additional capital was taken into the concern.

"The alterations, expansions, new departments and publicity will compel the command of about that much money," Mr. Trimmer patiently explained; "and while we could appropriate that amount from our respective concerns, we ought not to weaken our capital, particularly as financial affairs throughout

the country are so unsettled. This is not a brisk commercial year, nor can it be."

"Yes," admitted Bobby, "I've heard something of all this hard-times talk. I know Nick Allstyne sold his French racer, and Nick's supposed to be worth no end of money."

"Exactly," agreed Mr. Trimmer dryly. "This sixty thousand dollars' worth of stock, Mr. Burnit, I am quite sure that I can place with immediate purchasers, and if you will leave the matter to me I can have it all represented in our next meeting without any bother at all to you."

"Very kind of you, I am sure," agreed Bobby, thankful that this trifling detail was not to bore him.

And so it was that the Burnit-Trimmer Merchandise Corporation was incorporated at five hundred and sixty thousand dollars. It was considerably later when Bobby realized the significance of the fact that the subscribers to the additional capitalization consisted of Mr. Trimmer's son, his son-in-law, his head bookkeeper, his confidential secretary and his cousin, all of whom had also been minor stock-holders in the concern of Trimmer and Company.

It was upon the day preceding the first stock-holders' meeting of the reorganized company that Bobby, quite proud of the fact that he had acted independently of them, made the formal announcement to

Johnson and Applerod that the great consolidation had been effected.

"Beginning with to-morrow morning, Mr. Johnson," said he to that worthy, "the John Burnit Store will be merged into the Burnit-Trimmer Merchandise Corporation, and Mr. Trimmer will doubtless send his secretary to confer with you about an adjustment of the clerical work."

"Yes, sir," said Mr. Johnson dismally, and rose to open the filing case behind him. With his hand in the case he paused and turned a most woebegone countenance to the junior Burnit. "We shall be very regretful, Mr. Applerod and myself, to lose our positions, sir," he stated. "We have grown up with the business from boyhood."

"Nonsense!" exploded Applerod. "We would be regretful if that were to occur, but there is nothing of the sort possible. Why, Mr. Burnit, I think this consolidation is the greatest thing that ever happened. I've been in favor of it for years; and as for its losing me my position— Pooh!" and he snapped his fingers.

"Applerod is quite right, Mr. Johnson," said Bobby severely. "Nothing of the sort is contemplated. Yourself and Mr. Applerod are to remain with me as long as fair treatment and liberal pay and personal attachment can induce you to do so."

"Thank you, sir," said Mr. Johnson dryly, but he shook his head, and from the file produced one of the familiar gray envelopes.

Bobby eyed it askance as it came toward him, and winced as he saw the inscription. He was beginning to dread these missives. They seemed to follow him about, to menace him, to give him a constant feeling of guilt. Nevertheless, he took this one quite calmly and walked into his own room. It was addressed:

To My Son,
Upon the Occasion of His Completing a Consolidation with Silas Trimmer

and it read:

"When a man devils you for years to enter a business deal with him, you may rest assured that man has more to gain by it than you have. Aside from his wormwood business jealousy of me, Silas Trimmer has wanted this Grand Street entrance to his store for more than the third of a century; now he has it. He'll have your store next."

"Look here, Governor," protested Bobby aloud, to his lively remembrance of his father as he might have stood in that very room, "I call this rather rubbing it in. It's a bit unsportsmanlike. It's almost like laying a trap for a chap who doesn't know the game,"

and, rankling with a sense of injustice, he went out to Johnson.

"I say, Johnson," he complained, "it's rather my fault for being too stubborn to ask about it, but if you knew that Mr. Trimmer was trying to work a game on me that was dangerous to the business, why didn't you volunteer to explain it to me; to forewarn me and give me a chance for judgment with all the pros and cons in front of me?"

"From the bottom of my heart, Mr. Burnit," said Johnson with feeling, "I should like to have done it; but it was forbidden."

He already had lying before him another of the gray envelopes, and this he solemnly handed over. It was addressed:

To My Son,
Upon His Complaining that Johnson Gave Him No Warning Concerning Silas Trimmer

The message it contained was:

"It takes hard chiseling to make a man, but if the material is the right grain the tool-marks won't show. If I had wanted you merely to make money, I would have left the business entirely in the hands of Johnson and Applerod. But there is no use to put off pulling a tooth. It only hurts worse in the end."

When Bobby left the office he felt like walking in the middle of the street to avoid alley corners, since he was unable to divine from what direction the next brick might come. He had taken the business to heart more than he had imagined that he would, and the very fact of his father's having foreseen that he would succumb to this consolidation made him give grave heed to the implied suggestion that he would be a heavy loser by it. He had an engagement with Allstyne and Starlett at the Idlers' that afternoon, but they found him most preoccupied, and openly voted him a bore. He called on Agnes Elliston, but learned that she was out driving, and he savagely assured himself that he knew who was handling the reins. He dined at the Traders', and, for the first time since he had begun to frequent that place, the creases in his brow were real.

Later in the evening he dropped around to see Biff Bates. In the very center of the gymnasium he found that gentleman engaged in giving a preliminary boxing lesson to a spider-like new pupil, who was none other than Silas Trimmer. Responding to Biff's cheerful grin and Mr. Trimmer's sheepish one with what politeness he could muster, Bobby glumly went home.

On the next morning occurred the first stock-holders' meeting of the Burnit-Trimmer Merchandise Cor-

poration, which Bobby attended with some feeling of importance, for, with his twenty-six hundred shares, he was the largest individual stock-holder present. That was what had reassured him overnight: the magic "majority of stock!" Mr. Trimmer only had twenty-four hundred, and Bobby could swing things as he pleased. His father, omniscient as he was, must certainly have failed to foresee this fact. In his simplicity of such matters and his general unsuspiciousness, Bobby had not calculated that if the additional six hundred shares were to vote solidly with Mr. Trimmer against him, his twenty-six hundred shares would be confronted by three thousand, and so rendered paltry.

Mr. Trimmer was delighted to see young Mr. Burnit. This was a great occasion indeed, both for the John Burnit Store and for Trimmer and Company, and, in the opinion of Mr. Trimmer, his circular smile very much in evidence, John Burnit himself would have been proud to see this day! Mr. Smythe, Mr. Trimmer's son-in-law, also thought it a great day; Mr. Weldon, Mr. Trimmer's head bookkeeper, thought it a great day; Mr. Harvey, Mr. Trimmer's confidential secretary, and Mr. U. G. Trimmer, Mr. Silas Trimmer's cousin, shared this pleasant impression.

In the beginning the organization was without form

or void, as all such organizations are, but Mr. Trimmer, having an extremely clear idea of what was to be accomplished, proposed that Mr. Burnit accept the chair *pro tem.*—where he would be out of the way. The unanimous support which this motion received was quite gratifying to the feelings of Mr. Burnit, proving at once that his fears had been not only groundless but ungenerous, and, in accepting the chair, he made them what he considered a very neat little speech indeed, striving the while to escape that circular smile with its diameter of yellow teeth and its intersecting crescent of stiff mustache; for he disliked meanly to imagine that smile to have a sarcastic turn to-day. At the suggestion of Mr. Trimmer, Mr. Weldon accepted the post of secretary *pro tem.* Mr. Trimmer then, with a nicely bound black book in his hand, rose to propose the adoption of the stock constitution and by-laws which were neatly printed in the opening pages of this minute-book, and in the articles of which he had made some trifling amendments. Mr. Weldon, by request, read these most carefully and conscientiously, making quite plain that the entire working management of the consolidated stores was to be under the direct charge of a general manager and an assistant general manager, who were to be appointed and have their salaries fixed by the board of directors, as was meet and

proper. Gravely the stock-holders voted upon the adoption of the constitution and by-laws, and, with a feeling of pride, as the secretary called his name, Bobby cast his first vote in the following conventional form:

"Aye—twenty-six hundred shares."

Mr. Trimmer followed, voting twenty-four hundred shares; then Mr. Smythe, three hundred; Mr. Weldon, fifty; Mr. Harvey, fifty; Mr. U. G. Trimmer, fifty; Mr. Thomas Trimmer, whose proxy was held by his father, one hundred and fifty; making in all a total of fifty-six hundred shares unanimously cast in favor of the motion; and Bobby, after having roundly announced the result, felt that he was conducting himself with vast parliamentary credit and lit a cigarette with much satisfaction.

Mr. Trimmer, twirling his thumbs, displayed no surprise, nor even gratification, when Mr. Smythe almost immediately put him in nomination for president. Mr. Weldon promptly seconded that nomination. Mr. Harvey moved that the nominations for the presidency be closed. Mr. U. G. Trimmer seconded that motion, which was carried unanimously; and with no ado whatever Mr. Silas Trimmer was made president of the Burnit-Trimmer Merchandise Corporation, Mr. Burnit having most courteously cast twenty-six hundred votes for him; for was not Mr.

Trimmer entitled to this honor by right of seniority? In similar manner Mr. Burnit, quite pleased, and not realizing that the vice-president of a corporation has a much less active and influential position than the night watchman, was elected to the second highest office, while Mr. Weldon was made secretary and Mr. Smythe treasurer. Mr. Harvey, Mr. U. G. Trimmer and Mr. Thomas Trimmer were, as a matter of course, elected members of the board of directors, the four officers already elected constituting the remaining members of the board. There seemed but very little business remaining for the stock-holders to do, so they adjourned; then, the members of the board being all present and having waived in writing all formal notification, the directors went into immediate session, with Mr. Trimmer in the chair and Mr. Weldon in charge of the bright and shining new book of minutes.

The first move of that body, after opening the meeting in due form, was made by Mr. Harvey, who proposed that Mr. Silas Trimmer be constituted general manager of the consolidated stores at a salary of fifty thousand dollars per year, a motion which was immediately seconded by Mr. U. G. Trimmer.

Bobby was instantly upon his feet. Even with his total lack of experience in such matters there was something about this that struck him as overdrawn,

and he protested that fancy salaries should have no place in the reorganized business until experience had proved that the business would stand it. He was very much in earnest about it, and wanted the subject discussed thoroughly before any such rash step was taken. The balance of the discussion consisted in one word from Mr. Smythe, echoed by all his fellow-members.

"Question!" said that gentleman.

"You have all heard the question," said Mr. Trimmer calmly. "Those in favor will please signify by saying 'Aye.'"

"Aye!" voted four members of the board as with one scarcely interested voice.

"No!" cried Bobby angrily, and sprang to his feet, his anger confused, moreover, by the shock of finding unsuspected wolves tearing at his vitals. "Gentlemen, I protest against this action! I——"

Mr. Trimmer pounded on the table with his pencil in lieu of a gavel.

"The motion is carried. Any other business?"

It seemed that there was. Mr. Harvey proposed that Mr. Smythe be made assistant general manager at a salary of twenty-five thousand dollars per year. Again the farce of a ballot and the farce of a protest was enacted. Where now was the voting power of Bobby's twenty-six hundred shares? In the di-

rectors' meeting they voted as individuals, and they were six against one. Rather indifferently, as if the thing did not amount to much, Mr. Smythe proposed that the selection of a firm name for advertising and publicity purposes be left to the manager, and though Bobby voted no as to this proposition on general principles, it seemed of minor importance, in his then bewildered state of mind. After all, the thing which grieved him most just then was to find that people *could* do these things!

CHAPTER VI

CONSISTING ENTIRELY OF A RAPID SUCCESSION OF MOST PAINFUL SHOCKS

HE was still dazed with what had happened, when, the next morning, he turned into the office and found Johnson and Applerod packing up their personal effects. Workmen were removing letter-files and taking desks out of the door.

"What's the matter?" he asked, surveying the unwonted confusion in perplexity.

"The entire office force of the now defunct John Burnit Store has been dismissed, that's all!" blurted Applerod, now the aggrieved one. "You sold us out, lock, stock and barrel!"

"Impossible!" gasped Bobby.

Mr. Johnson glumly showed him curt letters of dismissal from Trimmer.

"Where's mine, I wonder?" inquired Bobby, trying to take his terrific defeat with sportsmanlike nonchalance.

"I don't suppose there is any for you, sir, inasmuch as you never had a recognized position to lose," replied Johnson, not unkindly. "Did the board of directors elect you to any salaried office?"

"Why, so they didn't!" exclaimed Bobby, and for the first time realized that no place had been made for him. He had taken it as a matter of course that he was to be a part of the consolidation, and the omission of any definite provision for him had passed unnoticed.

The door leading to his own private office banged open, and two men appeared, shoving through it the big mahogany desk turned edgewise.

"What are they doing?" Bobby asked sharply.

"Moving out all the furniture," snapped Applerod with bitter relish. "All the office work, I understand, is to be done in the other building, and this space is to be thrown into a special cut-glass department. I suppose the new desk is for Mr. Trimmer."

Furious, choking, Bobby left the office and strode back through the store. The first floor passageway was already completed between the two buildings, and a steady stream of customers was going over the bridge from the old Burnit store into the old Trimmer store. There were very few coming in the other direction. He had never been in Mr. Trimmer's offices, but he found his way there with no difficulty,

and Mr. Trimmer came out of his private room to receive him with all the suavity possible. In fact, he had been saving up suavity all morning for this very encounter.

"Well, what can we do for you this morning, Mr. Burnit?" he wanted to know, and Bobby, though accustomed to repression as he was, had a sudden impulse to drive his fist straight through that false circular smile.

"I want to know what provision has been made for me in this new adjustment," he demanded.

"Why, Mr. Burnit," expostulated Mr. Trimmer in much apparent surprise, "you have two hundred and sixty thousand dollars' worth of stock in what should be the best paying mercantile venture in this city; you are vice-president, and a member of the board of directors!"

"I have no part, then, in the active management?" Bobby wanted to know.

"It would be superfluous, Mr. Burnit. One of the chief advantages of such a consolidation is the economy that comes from condensing the office and managing forces. I regretted very much indeed to dismiss Mr. Johnson and Mr. Applerod, but they are very valuable men and should have no difficulty in placing themselves advantageously. In fact, I shall be glad to aid them in securing new positions."

"The thing is an outrage!" exclaimed Bobby with passion.

"My dear Mr. Burnit, it is business," said Mr. Trimmer coldly, and, turning, went deliberately into his own room, leaving Bobby standing in the middle of the floor.

Bobby sprang to that door and threw it open, and Trimmer, who had been secretly trembling all through the interview, turned to him with a quick pallor overspreading his face, a pallor which Bobby saw and despised and ignored, and which turned his first mad impulse.

"I'd like to ask one favor of you, Mr. Trimmer," said he. "In moving the furniture out of the John Burnit offices I should be very glad, indeed, if you would order my father's desk removed to my house. It is an old desk and can not possibly be of much use. You may charge its value to my account, please."

"Nonsense!" said Mr. Trimmer. "I'll have it sent out with pleasure. Is there anything else?"

"Nothing whatever at present," said Bobby, trembling with the task of holding himself steady, and walked out, unable to analyze the bitter emotions that surged within him.

On the sidewalk, standing beside his automobile, he found Johnson and Applerod waiting for him, and the moment he saw Johnson, cumbered with the

big index-file that he carried beneath his arm, he knew why.

"Give me the letter, Johnson," he said with a wry smile, and Johnson, answering it with another equally as grim, handed him a gray envelope.

Applerod, who had been the first to upbraid him, was now the first to recover his spirits.

"Never mind, Mr. Burnit," said he; "businesses and even fortunes have been lost before and have been regained. There are still ways to make money."

Bobby did not answer him. He was opening the letter, preparing to stand its contents in much the same spirit that he had often gone to his father to accept a reprimand which he knew he could not in dignity evade. But there was no reprimand. He read:

"There's no use in telling a young man what to do when he has been gouged. If he's made of the right stuff he'll know, and if he isn't, no amount of telling will put the right stuff in him. I have faith in you. Bobby, or I'd never have let you in for this goring.

"In the meantime, as there will be no dividends on your stock for ten years to come, what with 'improvements, expenses and salaries,' and as you will need to continue your education by embarking in some other line of business before being ripe enough to accomplish what I am sure you will want to do, you may

now see your trustee, the only thoroughly sensible person I know who is sincerely devoted to your interests. Her name is Agnes Elliston."

"What is the matter?" asked Johnson in sudden concern, and Applerod grabbed him by the arm.

"Oh, nothing much," said Bobby; "a little groggy, that's all. The governor just handed me one under the belt. By the way, boys"—and they scarcely noted that he no longer said "gentlemen"—"if you have nothing better in view I want you to consider yourselves still in my employ. I'm going into business again at once. If you will call at my house tomorrow forenoon I'll talk with you about it," and anxious to be rid of them he told his driver "Idlers'," and jumped into his automobile.

Agnes! That surely was giving him a solar-plexus blow! Why, what did the governor mean? It was putting him very much in a kindergarten position with the girl before whom he wanted to make a better impression than before anybody else in all the world.

It took him a long time to readjust himself to this cataclysm.

After all, though, was not his father right in this, as he had been in everything else? Humbly Bobby was ready to confess that Agnes had more brains

and good common sense than anybody, and was altogether about the most loyal and dependable person in all the world, with the single and sole exception of allowing that splendid looking and unknown chap to hang around her so. They were in the congested down-town district now, and as they came to a dead stop at a crossing, Bobby, though immersed in thought, became aware of a short, thick-set man, who, standing at the very edge of the car, was apparently trying to stare him out of countenance.

"Why, hello, Biff!" exclaimed Bobby. "Which way?"

"Just waiting for a South Side trolley," explained Biff. "Going over to see Kid Mills about that lightweight go we're planning."

"Jump in," said Bobby, glad of any change in his altogether indefinite program. "I'll take you over."

On the way he detailed to his athletic friend what had been done to him in the way of business.

"I know'd it," said Biff excitedly. "I know'd it from the start. That's why I got old Trimmer to join my class. Made him a special price of next to nothing, and got Doc Willets to go around and tell him he was in Dutch for want of training. Just wait."

"For what?" asked Bobby, smiling.

"Till the next time he comes up," declared Biff vengefully. "Say, do you know I put that shrimp's hour a-purpose just when there wouldn't be a soul up there; and the next time I get him in front of me I'm going to let a few slip that'll jar him from the cellar to the attic; and the next time anybody sees him he'll be nothing but splints and court-plaster."

"Biff," said Bobby severely, "you'll do nothing of the kind. You'll leave one Silas Trimmer to me. Merely bruising his body won't get back my father's business. Let him alone."

"But look here, Bobby——"

"No; I say let him alone," insisted Bobby.

"All right," said Biff sullenly; "but if you think there's a trick you can turn to double cross this Trimmer you've got another think coming. He's sunk his fangs in the business he's been after all his life, and now you couldn't pry it away from him with a jimmy. You know what I told you about him."

"I know," said Bobby wearily. "But honestly, Biff, did you ever see me go into a game where I was a loser in the end?"

"Not till this one," confessed Biff.

"And this isn't the end," retorted Bobby.

He knew that when he made such a confident assertion that he had nothing upon which to base it; that

he was talking vaguely and at random; but he also knew the intense desire that had arisen in him to reverse conditions upon the man who had waited until the father died to wrest that father's pride from the son; and in some way he felt coming strength. In Biff's present frame of conviction Bobby was pleased enough to drop him in front of Kid Mills' obscure abode, and turn with a sudden hungry impulse in the direction of Agnes. At the Ellistons', when the chauffeur was about to slow up, Bobby in a panic told him to drive straight on. In the course of half an hour he came back again, and this time pride alone—fear of what his chauffeur might think—determined him to stop. With much trepidation he went up to the door. Agnes was just preparing to go out, and she came down to him in the front parlor.

"This is only a business call," he confessed with as much appearance of gaiety as he could summon under the circumstance. "I've come around to see my trustee."

"So soon?" she said, with quick sympathy in her voice. "I'm *so* sorry, Bobby! But I suppose, after all, the sooner it happened the better. Tell me all about it. What was the cause of it?"

"You wouldn't marry me," charged Bobby. "If you had this never would have happened."

She shook her head and smiled, but she laid her hand upon his arm and drew closer to him.

"I'm afraid it would, Bobby. You might have asked my advice, but I expect you wouldn't have taken it."

"I guess you're right about that," admitted Bobby; "but if you'd only married me—— Honest, Agnes, when are you going to?"

"I shall not commit myself," she replied, smiling up at him rather wistfully.

"There's somebody else," declared Bobby, instantly assured by this evasiveness that the unknown had something to do with the matter.

"If there were, it would be my affair entirely, wouldn't it?" she wanted to know, still smiling.

"No!" he declared emphatically. "It would be my affair. But really I want to know. Will you, if I get my father's business back?"

"I'll not promise," she said. "Why, Bobby, the way you put it, you would be binding me *not* to marry you in case you *didn't* get it back!" and she laughed at him. "But let's talk business now. I was just starting out upon your affairs, the securing of some bonds for which the lawyer I have employed has been negotiating, so you may take me up there and he will arrange to get you the two hundred and fifty thousand dollars you are to have.

It's for a new start, without restrictions except that you are to engage in business with it. That's all the instructions I have."

"Thanks," said Bobby, with a gulp. "Honestly, Agnes, it's a shame. It's a low-down trick the governor played to put me in this helplessly belittled position with you."

"Why, how strange," she replied quietly. "I look upon it as a most graceful and agreeable position for myself."

"Oh!" he exclaimed blankly, as it occurred to him just how uncomfortable the situation must be to her, and he reproached himself with selfishness in not having thought of this phase of the matter before. "That's a fact," he admitted. "I say, Agnes, I'll say no more about that end of it if you don't; and, after all, I'm glad, too. It gives me a legitimate excuse to see you much oftener."

"Gracious, no!" she protested. "You fill up every spare moment that I have now; but so long as you are here on business this time, let's attend to business. You may take me up to see Mr. Chalmers. By the way, I want you to meet him, anyhow. You have seen him, I believe, once or twice. He was here one day when you called, and he was walking with me in the lobby of the theater when you came in to join us one evening."

"Y-e-s," drawled Bobby, as if he were placing the man with difficulty.

"The Chalmers' are charming people," she went on. "His wife is perfectly fascinating. We used to go to school together. They have only been married three months, and when they came here to go into business I was very glad to throw such of your father's estate as I am to handle into his hands. Whenever they are ready I want to engineer them into our set, but they live very quietly now. I know you'll like them."

"Oh, I'm sure I will," agreed Bobby heartily, and his face was positively radiant, as, for some unaccountable reason, he clutched her hand. She lifted it up beneath his arm, around which, for one ecstatic moment, she clasped her other hand, and together they went out into the hall, Bobby, simply driveling in his supreme happiness, allowing her to lead him wheresoever she listed. Still in the joy of knowing that his one dreaded rival was removed in so pleasant a fashion, he handed her into the automobile and they started out to see Mr. Chalmers. Their way led down Grand Street, past the John Burnit Store, and with all that had happened still rankling sorely in his mind, Bobby looked up and gave a gasp. Workmen were taking down the plain, dignified old sign of the John Burnit Store from the top of the building, and in its place they were raising up a

glittering new one, ordered by Silas Trimmer on the very day Bobby had agreed to go into the consolidation; and it read:

"TRIMMER AND COMPANY"

CHAPTER VII

PINK-CHEEKED APPLEROD RUSHES TO THE RESCUE WITH A GOLDEN SCHEME

AGNES had been surprised into an exclamation of dismay by that new sign, but she checked it abruptly as she saw Bobby's face. She could divine, but she could not fully know, how that had hurt him; how the pain of it had sunk into his soul; how the humiliation of it had tingled in every fiber of him. For an instant his breath had stopped, his heart had swelled as if it would burst, a great lump had come in his throat, a sob almost tore its way through his clenched teeth. He caught his breath sharply, his jaws set and his nostrils dilated, then the color came slowly back to his cheeks. Agnes, though longing to do so, had feared to lay her hand even upon his sleeve in sympathy lest she might unman him, but now she saw that she need not have feared. It had not weakened him, this blow; it had strengthened him.

"That's brutal," he said steadily, though the steadiness was purely a matter of will. "We must change that sign before we do anything else."

"Of course," she answered simply.

Involuntarily she stretched out her small gloved hand, and with it touched his own. Looking back once more for a fleeting glimpse at the ascending symbol of his defeat, he gripped her hand so hard that she almost cried out with the pain of it; but she did not wince. When he suddenly remembered, with a frightened apology, and laid her hand upon her lap and patted it, her fingers seemed as if they had been compressed into a numb mass, and she separated them slowly and with difficulty. Afterward she remembered that as a dear hurt, after all, for in it she shared his pain.

While they were still stunned and silent under Silas Trimmer's parting blow, the machine drew up at the curb in front of the building in which Chalmers had his office. Chalmers, Bobby found, was a most agreeable fellow, to whom he took an instant liking. It was strange what different qualities the man seemed to possess than when Bobby had first seen him in the company of Agnes. Their business there was very brief. Chalmers held for Bobby, subject to Agnes' order as trustee, the sum of two hundred and fifty thousand dollars in instantly convertible securities, and when they left, Bobby had a check for that amount comfortably tucked in his pocket.

There was another brief visit to the office of old

Mr. Barrister, where Agnes, again as Bobby's trustee, exhibited the papers Chalmers had made out for her, showing that the funds previously left in her charge had been duly paid over to Bobby as per the provisions of the will, and thereupon filed her order for a similar amount. Barrister received them with an "I told you so" air which amounted almost to satisfaction. He was quite used to seeing the sons of rich men hastening to become poor men, and he had so evidently classed Bobby as one of the regular sort, that Bobby took quite justifiable umbrage and decided that if he had any legal business whatever he would put it into the hands of Chalmers.

He spent the rest of the day with Agnes and took dinner at the Ellistons', where jolly Aunt Constance and shrewd Uncle Dan, in genuine sympathy, desisted so palpably from their usual joking about his "business career," that Bobby was more ill at ease than if they had said all the grimly humorous things which popped into their minds. For that reason he went home rather early, and tumbled into bed resolving upon the new future he was to face to-morrow.

At least, he consoled himself with a sigh, he was now a man of experience. He had learned something of the world. He was not further to be hoodwinked. His last confused vision was of Silas Trimmer on his knees begging for mercy, and the next thing he knew

was that some one was reminding him, with annoying insistency, of the early call he had left.

The world looked brighter that morning, and he was quite hopeful when, in the dim old study, seated at his father's desk and with the portrait of stern old John Burnit frowning and yet shrewdly twinkling down upon him, he received Johnson, dry and sour looking as if he expected ill news, and Applerod, bright and radiant as if Fortune's purse were just about to open to him.

"Well, boys," said Bobby cheerily, "we're going to stick right together. We're going to start into a new business as soon as we can find one that suits us, and your employment begins from this minute. We're beginning with a capital of two hundred and fifty thousand dollars," and rather pompously he spread the check upon the desk. His pompousness faded in something under fifteen seconds, for it was in about that length of time that he caught sight of a plain gray envelope then in the process of emerging from Johnson's pocket. He accepted it with something of reluctance, but opened it nevertheless; and this was the message of the late John Burnit:

To my Son Upon the Occasion of his Being Intrusted With Real Money

"In most cases the difference between spending

money and investing it is wholly a matter of speed. Not one man in ten knows when and where and how to put a dollar properly to work; so the only financial education I expect you to get out of an attempt to go into business is a painful lesson in subtraction."

"This letter, Johnson, is only a delicate intimation from the governor that I'll make another blooming ass of myself with this," commented Bobby, tapping his finger on the check, and placing the letter face downward beside it, where he eyed it askance.

"A quarter of a million!" observed Applerod, rolling out the amount with relish. "A great deal can be done with two hundred and fifty thousand dollars, you know."

"That's just the point," observed Bobby with a frown of perplexity, directed alternately to the faithful gentlemen who for upward of thirty years had been his father's right and left bowers. "What am I to do with it? Johnson, what would you do with two hundred and fifty thousand dollars?"

"Lose it," confessed stooped and bloodless Johnson. "I never made a dollar out of a dollar in my life."

"What would you do with it, Applerod?"

Mr. Applerod, scarcely able to contain himself, had been eagerly awaiting that question.

"Purchase, improve and market the Westmarsh Ad-

dition," he said promptly, expanding fully two inches across his already rotund chest.

"What?" snorted Johnson, and cast upon his workmate a look of withering scorn. "Are you still dreaming about the possibilities of that old swamp?"

"To be sure it is a swamp," admitted Mr. Applerod with some heat. "Do you suppose you could buy one hundred and twenty acres of directly accessible land, almost at the very edge of the crowded city limits, at two hundred dollars an acre if it wasn't swamp land?" he demanded. "Why, Mr. Burnit, it is the opportunity of a lifetime!"

"How much capital would be needed?" asked Bobby, gravely assuming the callous, inquisitorial manner of the ideal business man.

"Well, I've managed to buy up twenty acres out of my savings, and there are still one hundred acres to be purchased, which will take twenty thousand dollars. But this is the small part of it. Drainage, filling and grading is to be done, streets and sidewalks ought to be put down, a gift club-house, which would serve at first as an office, would be a good thing to build, and the thing would have to be most thoroughly advertised. I've figured on it for years, and it would require, all told, about a two-hundred-thousand investment."

"And what would be the return?" asked Bobby

without blinking at these big figures, and proud of his attitude, which, while conservative, was still one of openness to conviction.

"Figure it out for yourself," Mr. Applerod invited him with much enthusiasm. "We get ten building lots to the acre, turning one hundred and twenty acres into one thousand two hundred lots. Improved sites at any point surrounding this tract can not be bought for less than twenty-five dollars per front foot. Corner lots and those in the best locations would bring much more, but taking the average price at only six hundred dollars per lot, we would have, as a total return for the investment, seven hundred and twenty thousand dollars!"

"In how long?" Bobby inquired, not allowing himself to become in the slightest degree excited.

"One year," announced the optimistic Mr. Applerod with conviction.

Mr. Johnson, his lips glued tightly together in one firm, thin, straight line across his face, was glaring steadfastly at the corner of the ceiling, permitting no expression whatever to flicker in his eyes; noting which, Bobby turned to him with a point-blank question:

"What do you think of this opportunity, Mr. Johnson?" he asked.

Mr. Johnson glared quickly at Mr. Applerod.

"Tell him," defied that gentleman.

"I think nothing whatever of it!" snapped Mr. Johnson.

"What is your chief ground of objection?" Bobby wanted to know.

Again Mr. Johnson glared quickly at Mr. Applerod.

"Tell him," insisted that gentleman with an outward wave of both hands, expressive of his intense desire to have every secret of his own soul and of everybody's else laid bare.

"I will," said Johnson. "Your father, a dozen times in my own hearing, refused to have anything to do with the scheme."

Bobby turned accusing eyes upon Applerod, who, though red of face, was still strong of assertion.

"Mr. Burnit never declined on any other grounds than that he already had too many irons in the fire," he declared. "Tell him that, too, Johnson!"

"It was only his polite way of putting it," retorted Mr. Johnson.

"John Burnit was noted for his polite way of putting his business conclusions," snapped Applerod in return, whereat Bobby smiled with gleeful reminiscence, and Mr. Johnson smiled grimly, albeit reluctantly, and Mr. Applerod smiled triumphantly.

"I can see the governor doing it," laughed Bobby,

and dismissed the matter. "Mr. Johnson, as a start in business we may as well turn this study into a temporary office. Take this check down to the Commercial Bank, please, and open an account. You already have power of attorney for my signature. Procure a small set of books and open them. Make out for me against this account at the Commercial a check for ten thousand. Mr. Applerod, kindly reduce your swamp proposition to paper and let me have it by tomorrow. I'll not promise that I will do anything with it, but it would be only fair to examine it."

With these crisp remarks, upon the decisiveness of which Bobby prided himself very much, he left the two to open business for him under the supervision of the portrait of stern but humor-given old John Burnit.

"Applerod," said Johnson indignantly, his lean frame almost quivering, "it is a wonder to me that you can look up at that picture and reflect that you are trying to drag John Burnit's son into this fool scheme."

"Johnson," said Mr. Applerod, puffing out his cheeks indignantly, "you were given the first chance to advise Mr. Robert what he should do with his money, and you failed to do so. This is a magnificent business opportunity, and I should consider myself very remiss in my duty to John Burnit's son if I failed to urge it upon him."

Mr. Johnson picked up the letter that Bobby, evidently not caring whether they read it or not, had left behind him. He ran through it with a grim smile and handed it over to Applerod as his best retort.

At the home of Agnes Elliston Bobby's car stopped almost as a matter of habit, and though the hour was a most informal one he walked up the steps as confidently as if he intended opening the door with a latch-key; for since Agnes was become his trustee, Bobby had awakened, overnight, to the fact that he had a proprietary interest in her which could not be denied.

Agnes came down to meet him in a most ravishing morning robe of pale green, a confection so stunning in conjunction with her gold-brown eyes and waving brown hair and round white throat that Bobby was forced to audible comment upon it.

"Cracking!" said he. "I suppose that if I hadn't had nerve enough to pop in here unexpectedly before noon I wouldn't have seen that gown for ages."

It was Aunt Constance, the irrepressible, who, leaning over the stair railing, sank the iron deep into his soul.

"It was bought at Trimmer and Company's, Grand Street side, Bobby," she informed him, and with this Parthian shot she went back through the up-stairs hall, laughing.

"Ouch!" said Bobby. "That was snowballing a cripple," and he was really most woebegone about it.

"Never mind, Bobby, you have still plenty of chance to win," comforted Agnes, who, though laughing, had sympathetic inkling of that sore spot which had been touched. He seemed so forlorn, in spite of his big, good-natured self, that she moved closer to him and unconsciously put her hand upon his arm. It was too much for him in view of the way she looked, and, suddenly emboldened, he did a thing the mere thought of which, under premeditation, would have scared him into a frappéd perspiration. He placed his hands upon her shoulders, and, drawing her toward him, bent swiftly down to kiss her. For a fleeting instant she drew back, and then Bobby had the surprise of his life, for her warm lips met his quite willingly, and with a frank pressure almost equal to his own. She sprang back from him at once with sparkling eyes, but he had no mind to follow up his advantage, for he was dazed. It had left him breathless, amazed, incredulous. He stood for a full minute, his face gone white with the overwhelming wonder of this thing that had happened to him, and then the blunt directness which was part of his inheritance from his father returned to him.

"Well, anyhow, we're to be engaged at last," he said.

"No," she rebuked him, with a sudden flash of mischief; "that was perfectly wicked, and you mustn't do it again."

"But I will," he said, advancing with heightened color.

"You mustn't," she said firmly, and although she did not recede farther from him he stopped. "You mustn't make it hard for us, Bobby," she warned him. "I'm under promise, too; and that's all I can tell you now."

"The governor again," groaned Bobby. "I suppose that I'm not to talk to you about marrying, nor you to listen, until I have proved my right and ability to take care of you and your fortune and mine. Is that it?"

She smiled inscrutably.

"What brings you at this unearthly hour?" she asked by way of evasion. "Some business pretext, I'll be bound."

"Of course it is," he assured her. "This morning you are strictly in the rôle of my trustee. I want you to look at some property."

"But I have an appointment with my dressmaker."

"The dressmaker must wait."

"What a warning!" she laughed. "If you would order a mere—a mere acquaintance around so peremptorily, what would you do if you were married?"

"I'd be the boss," announced Bobby with calm confidence.

"Indeed?" she mocked, and started into the library. "You'd ask permission first, wouldn't you?"

"Where are you going?" he queried in return, and grinned.

"To telephone my dressmaker," she admitted, smiling, and realizing, too, that it was not all banter.

"I told you to, remember," asserted Bobby, with a strange new sense of masterfulness which would not down.

When she came down again, dressed for the trip, he was still in that dazed elation, and it lasted through their brisk ride to the far outskirts of the city, where, at the side of a watery marsh that extended for nearly a mile along the roadway, he halted.

"This is it," waving his hand across the dismal waste.

"It!" she repeated. "What?"

"The property that it was suggested I buy."

"No wonder your father thought it necessary to appoint a trustee," was her first comment. "Why, Bobby, what on earth could you do with it? It's too large for a frog farm and too small for a summer resort," and once more she turned incredulous eyes upon the "property."

Dark, oily water covered the entire expanse, and

through it emerged, here and there, clumps of dank vegetation, from the nature and dispersement of which one could judge that the water varied from one to three feet in depth. Higher ground surrounded it on all sides, and the urgent needs of suburban growth had scattered a few small, cheap cottages, here and there, upon the hills.

"It doesn't seem very attractive until you consider those houses," Bobby confessed. "You must remember that the city hasn't room to grow, and must take note that it is trying to spread in this direction. Wouldn't a fellow be doing a rather public-spirited thing, and one in which he might take quite a bit of satisfaction, if he drained that swamp, filled it, laid out streets and turned the whole stretch into a cluster of homes in place of a breeding-place for fevers?"

"You talk just like a civic improvement society," she said, laughing.

"We did have a chap lecturing on that down at the club a few nights ago," he admitted, "and maybe I have picked up a bit of the talk. But wouldn't it be a good thing, anyhow?"

"Oh, I quite approve of it, now that I see your plan," she agreed; "but could it be made to pay?"

"Well," he returned with a grave assumption of that businesslike air he had recently been trying to copy down at the Traders' Club, "there are one hun-

dred and twenty acres in the tract. I can buy it for two hundred dollars an acre, and sell each acre, in building lots, for full six thousand. It seems to me that this is enough margin to carry out the needed improvements and make the marketing of it worth while. What do you think of it?"

They both gazed out over that desolate expanse and tried to picture it dotted with comfortable cottages, set down in grassy lawns that bordered on white, clean streets, and the idea of the transformation was an attractive one.

"It looks to me like a perfectly splendid idea," Agnes admitted. "I wonder what your father would have thought of it."

"Well," confessed Bobby a trifle reluctantly, "this very proposition was presented to him several times, I believe, but he always declined to go into it."

"Then," decided Agnes, so quickly and emphatically that it startled him, "don't touch it!"

"Oh, but you see," he reminded her, "the governor couldn't go into everything that was offered him, and to this plan he never urged any objection but that he had too many irons in the fire."

"I wouldn't touch it," declared Agnes, and that was her final word in the matter, despite all his arguments. If John Burnit had declined to go into it, no matter for what reason, the plan was not worth considering.

CHAPTER VIII

BOBBY SUCCEEDS IN SNAPPING A BARGAIN FROM UNDER SILAS TRIMMER'S NOSE

STILL undecided, but carrying seriously the thought that he must overlook no opportunity if he was to prove himself the successful man that his father had so ardently wished him to become, Bobby dropped into the Idlers' Club for lunch, where Nick Allstyne and Payne Winthrop hailed him as one returned from the dead.

"Just the chap," declared Nick. "Stan Rogers has written me that I'm to scrape the regular crowd together and come up to his new Canadian lodge for a hunt. Stag affair, you know. Real sport and no pink-coat pretense."

"Sorry, Nick," said Bobby, pluming himself a trifle upon his steadfastness to duty, "but I know what Stan's stag affairs are like. It would mean two weeks at least, and I could not spare that much time from the city."

"Business again!" groaned Payne in mock dismay.

"This grasping greed for gain is blighting the most promising young men of our avaricious country. Why, it's positively shameful, Bobby, when your father must have left you over three million."

"Two hundred and fifty thousand, so far as I'm allowed to inquire just now," corrected Bobby; "and I'm ordered to go into business with that and prove that I'm not such a blithering idiot that I can't be trusted with the rest of it, whatever there is."

"But I thought you'd had your trial by fire and pulled out of it," interposed Nick. "I heard that you had sold your interests or something, and when I saw a new sign over the store I knew that it was true. Sensible thing, I call it."

"Sensible!" winced Bobby. "You're allowing me a mighty pleasant way out of it, but the fact of the matter is that I lost in such a stinging way I'm bound to get back into the game and do nothing else until I win," and he explained how Silas Trimmer had performed upon him a neat and delicate operation in commercial surgery.

They were properly sympathetic; not that they cared much about business, but if Bobby had entered any game whatsoever in which he had been soundly beaten, they could quite understand his desire to stay in that game until he could show points on the right side.

"Nevertheless," Nick urged, "you ought to take a little breathing spell in between."

All through lunch, and through the game of billiards which followed, they strove to make him see the error of his ways, but Bobby was obdurate, and at last they gave him up as a bad job, with the grave prediction that later he would find himself nothing more nor less than a beast of burden. When he left them Bobby was surprised at himself. For a time he had feared that in his declaration of such close attention to business he might be posing; but he found that to miss a stag hunting party, which heretofore had been one of his keenest delights, weighed upon him not at all; found actually that he would far rather stay in the city to engage in the game of finance which was unfolding before him! He came upon this surprising discovery while he was on his way across to a side street, where, on the fourth floor of a store and warehouse building, he let himself in at a wide door with a latch-key and entered the gymnasium of Biff Bates. That gentleman, in trunks, sweater and sandals, was padding all alone around and around the edge of the hall at a steady jog, which, after twenty solid minutes, had left no effect whatever upon his respiration.

"Getting fat as a butcher again," he announced as he trotted steadily around to Bobby, suddenly stop-

ping short with an expansive grin across his wide face and a handshake that it took an athlete to withstand. "Got to cut it down or it'll put me on the blink. What's the best thing you know, chum?"

"How does this hit you?" asked Bobby, taking from his pocket the check Johnson had given him that morning.

Mr. Bates looked at it with his hands behind him.

"Pleased to make your acquaintance," he said to the slip of paper, nodding profoundly.

"Oh, everybody's friendly to these," said Bobby, indorsing the check. "It is for the new gymnasium," he explained. "Now, partner, turn loose and monopolize the physical training business of this city."

"Partner!" scorned Mr. Bates. "Look here, old pal, there's only one way I'll take this big ticket, and that is that you'll drag down your split of the profits."

"But don't I on this place?" protested Bobby.

"Nit!" retorted Mr. Bates with infinite scorn. "You put them right back into the business, but that don't go any more. If we start this big joint it's got to be partners right, see? Or else take back this wealthy handwriting. I don't guess I want it, anyhow. From past performances you need all the money in the world, and ten thousand simoleons will put a crimp in any wad."

"No," laughed Bobby; "you're saving it for me when you take it. I've just read a very nice note, left for me by the governor, that I'll be a fool and lose anyhow."

Mr. Bates grinned.

"You will, all right, all right, if you're going into business," he admitted, and stuffed the check in the upturned cuff of his sweater. "After these profit-and-loss artists get your goat on all the starts your old man left you, maybe I'll have to put up the eats and sleeps for you anyhow; huh?" and Mr. Bates laughed with keen enjoyment of this delicately expressed idea. "How are you going to divorce yourself from the rest of it, Bobby?"

"I'm not quite sure," said Bobby. "You know that big stretch of swamp land, out on the Millberg Road?"

"Where Paddy Dolan fell in and died from drinkin' too much water? Sure I do."

"Well, it has been suggested to me that I buy it, drain it, fill it, put in paved streets, cut it up into building lots and sell it."

"And build it full of these pale yellow shacks that the honest working slob buys with seventeen years of his wages, and then loses the shack?" Biff incredulously wanted to know.

"You guessed wrong, Biff," laughed Bobby. "Just

selling the lots will be enough for me. What do you think of it?"

"I don't know," said Mr. Bates thoughtfully. "I know they frame up such stunts and boost 'em strong in the papers, and if any of these real-estate sharps is working just for their healths they've been stung from all I've seen of 'em. But the main point is, who's the guy that's tryin' to lead you to it?"

"Oh, that part's all right," replied Bobby with perfect assurance. "The man who wants me to finance this, and who has already bought some of the land, was one of my father's right-hand men for nearly thirty years."

"Then that's all right," agreed Mr. Bates. "But say!" he suddenly exclaimed as a new thought struck him; "it's a wonder this right-mitt mut of your father's didn't make the old man fall for it long ago, if it's such a hot muffin."

"He did try it," confessed Bobby with hesitation for the second time that day; "but the governor always complained that he had too many other irons in the fire."

"He did, *did* he?" Mr. Bates wanted to know, fixing accusing eyes on Bobby. "Then don't be the fall guy for any other touting. Your old man knew this business dope from Sheepshead Bay to Oakland. You take it from me that this tip ain't the one best bet."

Bobby left the gymnasium with a certain degree of dissatisfaction, not only with Mr. Applerod's scheme but with the fact that wherever he went his father's business wisdom was thrown into his teeth. That evening, drawn to the atmosphere into which events had plunged him, he dined at the Traders' Club. As he passed one of the tables Silas Trimmer leered up at him with the circular smile, which, bisected by a row of yellow teeth and hooded with a bristle of stubby mustache, had now come to aggravate him almost past endurance. To-night it made him approach his dinner with vexation, and, failing to find the man he had sought, he finished hastily. As he went out, Silas Trimmer, though looking straight in his direction, did not seem to be at all aware of Bobby's approach. He was deep in a business discussion with his priggish son-in-law.

"It's a great opportunity," he was loudly insisting. "If I can secure that land I'll drain and improve it and cut it up into building lots. This city is ripe for a suburban boom."

That settled it with Bobby. No matter what arguments there might be to the contrary, if Silas Trimmer had his eye on that piece of property, Bobby wanted it.

Applerod, though eagerness brought him early, had no sooner entered the study next morning than

Bobby, who was already dressed for business and who had his machine standing outside the door, met him briskly.

"Keep your hat on, Applerod," he ordered. "We'll go right around and buy the rest of that property at once."

"I thought those figures I left last night would convince you," beamed Mr. Applerod.

There is no describing the delight and pride with which that highly-gratified gentleman followed the energetic young Mr. Burnit to the curb, nor the dignity with which, a few minutes later, he led the way into the office of one Thorne, real-estate dealer.

"Mr. Thorne, Mr. Robert Burnit," said Mr. Applerod, hastening straight to business. "Mr. Burnit has come around to close the deal for that Westmarsh property."

Mr. Thorne was suavity itself as he shook hands with Mr. Burnit, but the most aching regret was in his tone as he spoke.

"I'm very sorry indeed, Mr. Burnit," he stated; "but that property, which, by the way, seems very much in demand, passed out of my hands yesterday afternoon."

"To whom?" Mr. Applerod excitedly wanted to know. "I think you might have let us have time to turn around, Thorne. I spoke about it to you yester-

day morning, you know, and said that I felt quite hopeful Mr. Burnit would buy it."

"I know," said Mr. Thorne, politely but coldly; "and I told you at the time we talked about it that I never hold anything in the face of a bona fide offer."

"But who has it?" Bobby insisted, more eager now to get it, since it had slipped away from him, than ever before.

"The larger portion of it, the ninety-two acres adjoining Mr. Applerod's twenty," Mr. Thorne advised him, "was taken up by Miles, Eddy and Company. The north eight acres are owned by Mr. Silas Trimmer, and I am quite positive, from what Mr. Trimmer told me, not two hours later, that this parcel is not for sale."

Bobby's heart sank. Eight acres of that land had already been gobbled up by Silas Trimmer, and, no doubt, that astute and energetic business gentleman was now after the balance.

"Where is the office of Miles, Eddy and Company?" Bobby asked, with a crispness that pleased him tremendously as he used it.

"Twenty-six Plum Street," Mr. Thorne advised him.

"Thanks," said Bobby, and whirled out of the door, followed by the disconsolate Applerod.

At the office of Miles, Eddy and Company better luck awaited them.

Yes, that firm had secured possession of the Westmarsh ninety-two acres. Yes, the property was listed for sale, having been bought strictly for speculative purposes. And its figure? The price was now three hundred dollars per acre.

"I'll take it," said Bobby.

There was positive triumph in his voice as he announced this decision. He would show Silas Trimmer that he was awake at last, that he was not to be beaten in every deal.

"Twenty-seven thousand six hundred dollars," said Bobby, figuring the amount on a pad he picked up from Mr. Eddy's desk. "Very well. Allow me to use your telephone a moment. Mr. Chalmers," directed Bobby when he had his new lawyer on the wire, "kindly get into communication with Miles, Eddy and Company and look up the title on ninety-two acres of Westmarsh property which they have for sale. If the title is clear the price is to be three hundred dollars per acre, for which amount you will have a check, payable to your order, within half an hour."

Then to Johnson—biting his pen-handle in Bobby's study and wondering where his principal and Applerod could be at this hour—he telephoned to deliver a check in the amount of twenty-seven thousand six

hundred dollars to Mr. Chalmers. Never, since he had been plunged into "business," had Bobby been so elated with himself as when he walked from the office of Miles, Eddy and Company; and, to keep up the good work, as soon as he reached the hall he turned to Applerod with a crisp, ringing voice, which was the product of that elation.

"Now for an engineer," he said.

"Already as good as secured," Mr. Applerod announced, triumphant that every necessity had been anticipated. "Jimmy Platt, son of an old neighbor of mine. Fine, smart boy, and knows all about the Westmarsh proposition. Bless you, I figured on this with him every vacation during his schooling!"

An hour later, Bobby, Mr. Applerod and the secretly jubilant Jimmy Platt had sped out Westmarsh way, and were inspecting the hundred and twelve acres of swamp which the new firm of Burnit and Applerod held between them.

"It's a fine job," said the young engineer, coveting anew the tremendous task as he bent upon it an admiring professional eye. "This time next year you won't recognize the place. It's a noble thing, Mr. Burnit, to turn an utterly useless stretch of swamp like this into habitable land. Have you secured the entire tract?"

"Unfortunately, no," Bobby confessed with a

frown. "The extreme north eight acres are owned by another party."

"And when you drain your property," mused Jimmy, smiling, "you will drain his."

"Not if I can help it," declared Bobby emphatically.

"You must come to some arrangement before you begin," warned the engineer with the severe professional authority common to the quite young. Already, however, he was trying to grow regulation engineer's whiskers; also he immediately planned to get married upon the proceeds of this big job, which, after years of chimerical dreaming, had become too real, almost, to be believed. "Perhaps you could get the owner to stand his proportionate share of the expense of drainage."

Bobby smiled at the suggestion but made no other answer. He knew Silas Trimmer, or thought that he did, and the idea of Silas bearing a portion of a huge expense like this, when he could not be forced to shoulder it, struck him as distinctly humorous.

CHAPTER IX

AGNES DELIVERS BOBBY A NOTE FROM OLD JOHN BURNIT—IN A GRAY ENVELOPE

THAT night, at the Traders' Club, Bobby was surprised when Mr. Trimmer walked over to his table and dropped his pudgy trunk and his lean limbs into a chair beside him. His yellow countenance was creased with ingratiating wrinkles, and the smile behind his immovable mustache became of perfectly flawless circumference as his muddy black eyes peered at Bobby through thick spectacles. It seemed to Bobby that there was malice in the wrinkles about those eyes, but the address of Mr. Trimmer was most conciliatory.

"I have a fuss to pick with you, young man," he said with clumsy joviality. "You beat me upon the purchase of that Westmarsh property. Very shrewd, indeed, Mr. Burnit; very like your father. I suppose that now, if I wanted to buy it from you, I'd have to pay you a pretty advance." And he rubbed his hands as if to invite the opening of negotiations.

"It is not for sale," said Bobby, stiffening; "but I

might consider a proposition to buy your eight acres." He offered this suggestion with reluctance, for he had no mind to enter transactions of any sort with Silas Trimmer. Still, he recalled to himself with a sudden yielding to duty, business is business, and his father would probably have waved all personal considerations aside at such a point.

"Mine *is* for sale," offered Silas, a trifle too eagerly, Bobby thought.

"How much?" he asked.

"A thousand dollars an acre."

"I won't pay it," declared Bobby.

"Well," replied Mr. Trimmer with a deepening of that circular smile which Bobby now felt sure was maliciously sarcastic, "by the time it is drained it will be worth that to any purchaser."

"Suppose we drain it," suggested Bobby, holding both his temper and his business object remarkably well in hand. "Will you stand your share of the cost?"

"It strikes me as an entirely unnecessary expense at present," said Silas and smiled again.

"Then it won't be drained," snapped Bobby.

Later in the evening he caught Silas laughing at him, his shoulders heaving and every yellow fang protruding. The next morning, keeping earlier hours than ever before in his life, Bobby was waiting out-

side Jimmy Platt's door when that gentleman started to work.

"The first thing you do," he directed, still with a memory of that aggravating laugh, "I want you to build a cement wall straight across the north end of my Westmarsh property."

Mr. Platt smiled and shook his head.

"Evidently you can not buy that north eight acres, and don't intend to drain it," he commented, stroking sagely the sparse beginning of those slow professional whiskers. "It's your affair, of course, Mr. Burnit, but I am quite sure that spite work in engineering can not be made to pay."

"Nevertheless," insisted Bobby, "we'll build that wall."

The previous afternoon Jimmy Platt had made a scale drawing of the property from city surveys, and now the two went over it carefully, discussing it in various phases for fully an hour, proving estimates of cost and general feasibility. At the conclusion of that time Bobby, well pleased with his own practical manner of looking into things, telephoned to Johnson and asked for Applerod. Mr. Applerod had not yet arrived.

"Very well," said Bobby, "when he comes have him step out and secure suitable offices for us," and this detail despatched he went out with his engineer to

make a circuit of the property and study its drainage possibilities.

From profiles that Platt had made they found the swamp at its upper point to be much lower than the level of the river, which ran beyond low hills nearly a mile away; but the river made a detour, including a considerable fall, coming back again to within a scant half-mile of the southern end of the tract, where it was much lower than the marsh. Between marsh and river at the south was an immense hill, too steep and rugged for any practical purpose, and this they scaled.

The west end of the city lay before them crowding close to the river bank, and already its tentacles had crept around and over the hills and on past Westmarsh tract. Young Platt looked from river to swamp, his eyes glowing over the possibilities that lay before them.

"Mr. Burnit," he announced, after a gravity of thought which he strove his best to make take the place of experience, "you ought to be able to buy this hill very cheaply. Just through here we'll construct our drainage channel, and with the excavation fill your marsh. It is one of the neatest opportunities I have ever seen, and I want to congratulate you upon your shrewdness in having picked out such a splendid investment."

This, Bobby felt, was praise from Cæsar, and he was correspondingly elated.

He did not return to the study until in the afternoon. He found Johnson livid with abhorrence of Applerod's gaudy metamorphosis. That gentleman wore a black frock-coat, a flowered gray waistcoat, pin-striped light trousers, shining new shoes, sported a gold-headed cane, and on the table was the glistening new silk hat which had reposed upon his snow-white curls. His pink face was beaming as he rose to greet his partner.

"Mr. Burnit," said he, shaking hands with almost trembling gravity and importance, "this day is the apex of my life, and I'm happy to have the son of my old and revered employer as my partner."

"I hope that it may prove fortunate for both of us," replied Bobby, repressing his smile at the acquisition of the "make-up" which Applerod had for years aspired to wear legitimately.

Johnson, humped over the desk that had once been Bobby's father's, snorted and looked up at the stern portrait of old John Burnit; then he drew from the index-file which he had already placed upon the back of that desk a gray-tinted envelope which he handed to Bobby with a silence that was more eloquent than words. It was inscribed:

To my Son if he is Fool Enough to Take up With Applerod's Swamp Scheme

Rather impatiently Bobby tore it open, and on the inside he found:

"When shrewd men persist in passing up an apparently cinch proposition, don't even try to find out what's the matter with it. In this six-cylinder age no really good opportunity runs loose for twenty-four hours."

"If the governor had only arranged to leave me his advice beforehand instead of afterward," Bobby complained to Agnes Elliston that evening, "it might have a chance at me."

"The blow has fallen," said Agnes with mock seriousness; "but you must remember that you brought it on yourself. You have complained to *me* of your father's carefully-laid plans for your course in progressive bankruptcy, and he left in my keeping a letter for you covering that very point."

"*Not* in a gray envelope, I hope," groaned Bobby.

"*In* a gray envelope," she replied firmly, going across to her own desk in the library.

"I had feared," said Bobby dismally, "that sooner or later I should find he had left letters for me in your charge as well as in Johnson's, but I had hoped,

if that were the case, that at least they would be in pink envelopes."

She brought to him one of the familiar-looking missives, and Bobby, as he took it, looked speculatively at the big fireplace, in which, as it was early fall, comfortable-looking real logs were crackling.

"Don't do it, Bobby," she warned him smiling. "Let's have the fun together," and she sat beside him on the couch, snuggling close.

The envelope was addressed:

To My Son Upon his Complaining that His Father's Advice Comes too Late!

He opened it, and together they read:

"No boy will believe green apples hurt him until he gets the stomach-ache. Knowing you to be truly my son, I am sure that if I gave you advice beforehand you would not believe it. This way you will."

Bobby smiled grimly.

"I remember one painful incident of about the time I put on knickerbockers," he mused. "Father told me to keep away from a rat-trap that he had bought. Of course I caught my hand in it three minutes afterward. It hurt and I howled, but he only looked at me coldly until at last I asked him to help. He let the

thing squeeze while he asked if a rat-trap hurt. I admitted that it did. Would I believe him next time? I acknowledged that I would, and he opened the trap. That was all there was to it except the raw place on my hand; but that night he came to my room after I had gone to bed, and lay beside me and cuddled me in his arms until I went to sleep."

"Bobby," said Agnes seriously, "not one of these letters but proves his aching love for you."

"I know it," admitted Bobby with again that grim smile. "Which only goes to prove another thing, that I'm in for some of the severest drubbings of my life. I wonder where the clubs are hidden."

He found one of them late that same night at the Idlers'. Clarence Smythe, Silas Trimmer's son-in-law, drifted in toward the wee small hours in an unusual condition of hilarity. He had a Vandyke, had Mr. Smythe, and was one who cherished a mad passion for clothes; also, as an utterly impossible "climber," he was as cordially hated as Bobby was liked at the Idlers', where he had crept in "while the window was open," as Nick Allstyne expressed it. Ordinarily he was most prim and pretty of manner, but to-night he was on vinously familiar terms with all the world, and, crowding himself upon Bobby's quiet whist crowd, slapped Bobby joyously on the shoulder.

"Generous lad, Bobby!" he thickly informed All-

I'm in for some of the severest drubbings of my life

styne and Winthrop and Starlett. "If you chaps have any property you've wanted to unload for half a lifetime, here's the free-handed plunger to buy it."

"How's that?" Bobby wanted to know, guessing instantly at the humiliating truth.

"That Westmarsh swamp belonged to Trimmer," laughed Mr. Smythe, so bubbling with the hugeness of the joke that he could not keep his secret; "and when Thorne, after pumping your puffy man, told my clever father-in-law you wanted it, he promptly bought it from himself in the name of Miles, Eddy and Company and put up the price to three hundred an acre. Besides taking the property off his shoulders you've given him nearly a ten-thousand-dollar advance for it. Fine business!"

"Great!" agreed blunt Jack Starlett. "Almost as good a joke as refusing to pay a poker debt because it isn't legal."

Bobby smiled his thanks for the shot, but inside he was sick. The game they were playing was a parting set-to, for the three others were leaving in the morning for Stanley's hunt, but Bobby was glad when it was over. In the big, lonely house he sat in the study for an hour before he went to bed, looking abstractedly up at the picture of old John Burnit and worrying over this new development. It cut him to the quick, not so much that he had been made a fool of by

"clever" real-estate men, had been led, imbecile-like, to pay an extra hundred dollars per acre for that swamp land, but that the advantage had gone to Silas Trimmer.

Moreover, why had Silas put a prohibitive valuation upon that north eight acres? Why did he want to keep it? It must be because Silas really expected that his tract would be drained free of charge, and that he would thus have the triumph of selling it for an approximate six thousand dollars an acre in the form of building lots. In the face of such a conclusion, the thought of the cement wall that he had ordered built was a great satisfaction.

It was a remarkably open winter that followed, and outdoor operations could thereby go on uninterrupted. In the office, the pompous Applerod, in his frock-coat and silk hat, ground Johnson's soul to gall dust; for he had taken to saying "*Mr.* Johnson" most formally, and issuing directions with maddening politeness and consideration. An arrangement had been effected with Applerod, whereby that gentleman, for having suggested the golden opportunity, was to reap the entire benefit of the improvement on his own twenty acres, Bobby financing the whole deal and charging Applerod's share of it against his account. Applerod stood thereby to gain about seventy-six thousand dollars over and above the price he had paid

for his twenty acres; and, moreover, *Bobby had decided to call the improved tract the Applerod Addition!* When that name began to appear in print, coupled with flaming advertisements of Applerod's devising, there was grave danger of the rosy-cheeked old gentleman's losing every button from every fancy vest in his possession.

In the meantime, thoroughly in love with the vast enterprise which he had projected, Bobby spent his time outdoors, fascinated, unable to find any peace elsewhere than upon his Titanic labor. His evenings he spent in such social affairs as he could not avoid; with Agnes Elliston; with Biff Bates; in an occasional game of billiards at the Idlers'; but his days, from early morning until the evening whistle, he spent amid the clang of pick and shovel, the rattling of the trams, the creaking of the crane. It was an absorbing thing to see that enormous groove cut down through the big hill, and to watch the growth of the great mounds which grew up out of the marsh. The ditch that should drain off all this murky water was, of course, the first thing to be achieved, and, from the base of the hill through which it was to be cut, the engineer ran a tram bridge straight across the swamp to the new retaining wall; and from this, with the aid of a huge, long-armed crane which lifted cars bodily from the track, the soil was dumped on either side as

it was removed from the cut. By the latter part of December the ditch had been completed and connected with the special sewer which, by permission of the city, had been built to carry the overflow to the river, and, the open weather still holding, the stagnant pool which had been a blot upon the landscape for untold ages began to flow sluggishly away, displaced by the earth from the disappearing hill.

The city papers were teeming now with the vast energy and public-spirited enterprise of young Robert Burnit and Oliver P. Applerod, and there were many indications that the enterprise was to be a most successful one. Even before they were ready to receive them, applications were daily made for reservations in the new district, and individual home-seekers began to take Sunday trips out to where the big undertaking was in progress.

"You sure have got 'em going, Bobby," confessed the finally-convinced Biff Bates after a visit of inspection. "Here's where you put the hornet on one Silas Tight-Wad Trimmer all right, all right. But the bones don't roll right that the side bet don't go for Johnson instead of Applegoat. He's a shine, for me. I think he's all to the canary color inside, but this man Johnson's some man if he only had a shell to put it in. Me for him!"

The unexpressed friendship that had sprung up

between the taciturn bookkeeper and the loquacious ex-pugilist was both a puzzle and a delight to Bobby, and it was one of his great joys to see them together, they not knowing why they liked such companionship, not having a single topic of conversation in common, but unconsciously enjoying that vague, sympathetic man-soul they found in each other.

CHAPTER X

AGNES AND BOBBY DISCERN DIAMOND-STUDDED SPURS FOR THE LATTER

ABOUT the first of February the filling and grading were finished and the construction of the streets began, and the middle of March saw the final disappearance of everything, except that dark, eight-acre spot of Silas Trimmer's, which might remind one of the tract once known as the Westmarsh. In its place lay a broad, yellow checker-board, formed by intersecting streets of asphalt edged with cement pavements, and in the center, at the crossing of broad Burnit and Applerod Avenues, there arose, over a spot where once frogs had croaked and mosquitoes clustered in crowds, a pretty club-house, which was later to be donated to the suburb; and a great satisfaction fell upon the soul of Bobby Burnit like a benediction.

Also one Oliver P. Applerod added two full inches to his strut. He seldom came out to the scene of actual operations, for there was none there except workmen

to see his frock-coat and silk hat; but occasionally, from a sense of duty inextricably mingled with self-assertiveness, he paid a visit of inspection, and upon one of these his eyes were confronted by a huge new board sign, visible for half a mile, that overlooked the Applerod Addition from the hills to the north. It bore but two words: "Trimmer's Addition." Applerod, holding his broadcloth tight about him to keep it from yellow contamination as a car rumbled by, looked and wiped his glasses and looked again, then, highly excited, he called Bobby to him.

"Why didn't you tell me of this?" he demanded, pointing to the sign.

Bobby, happy in sweater and high boots and liberal decorations of clay, only laughed.

"The sign went up only yesterday," he stated.

"But it is competition. Unfair competition! He is stealing our thunder," protested Applerod.

"He has a perfect right to lay out a subdivision if he wants," said Bobby. "But don't worry, Applerod. I've been over there and the thing is a joke. The tract is one-fourth the size of ours, it is uphill and downhill, only a little grading is being done, streets are cut through but not paved, and a few cheap board sidewalks are being put down. He's had to pay a lot more for his land than we have, and can not sell his lots any cheaper."

"There's no telling what Silas Trimmer will do," said Applerod, shaking his head.

"Nonsense," said Bobby; "there is no chance that people will pass by our lots and buy one of his."

Applerod walked away unconvinced. Had it been any one else than Silas Trimmer who had set up this opposition he would not have minded so much, but Applerod had come to have a mighty fear of John Burnit's ancient enemy, and presently he came back to Bobby more panic-stricken than ever.

"I'm going to sell my interest in the Applerod Addition the minute I find a buyer," he declared, "and I'd advise you to do the same."

"Don't be foolish," counseled Bobby, frowning. "You *can't* lose."

"But man!" quavered Applerod. "I have four thousand dollars of my own cash, all I've been able to scrape together in a lifetime, tied up in this thing, and I *mustn't* lose!"

Bobby regarded his father's old confidential clerk more in sorrow than in anger. He was not used to dealing with men of any age so utterly lacking in gameness.

"Four thousand," he repeated, then he looked across his big checker-board. "I'll give you ten thousand for it right now."

"What!" objected Applerod, aghast. "Why, Burn-

it, the work is nearly done and I have already in sight seventy-six thousand dollars of clear profit over my investment."

Bobby did not remind Applerod that his four thousand dollars represented only a trifling part of the investment required to yield this seventy-six thousand dollars' profit. Yet, after all, there was no flaw in Applerod's commercial reasoning.

"I didn't expect you to accept it," replied Bobby. "If you were determined to get out, however, you've had an offer of six thousand profit, with no risk."

"I'd be crazy," declared Applerod. "I can get a better price than that."

Bobby was thoughtful for an hour after Applerod had left him; then he hurried into the club-house and telephoned to Chalmers. This was in the forenoon. In the afternoon Applerod was served with an injunction based upon an indivisibility of interest, restraining him from disposing of his share; and in his anger he let it slip out that he had already been trying to open negotiations with Trimmer!

"Honestly, it hurts!" said Bobby wearily, telling of the incident to Agnes that night. "I didn't know there were so many unsportsmanlike people."

"I think that is precisely what your father wanted you to find out," she observed.

"I don't want to know it," protested Bobby. "I'd

stay much happier to believe that everybody in the world was of the right sort."

She shook her head.

"No, Bobby," she said gently; "you have to know that there is the other kind, in order properly to appreciate truth and honor and loyalty."

"I could almost believe I was in a Sunday-school class," grinned Bobby. "No wonder it's snowing."

Agnes looked out of the window with a cry of delight. Those floating flakes were the very first snow of the season; but they were by no means the last. The winter, delayed, but apparently all the more violent for that very reason, burst suddenly upon the city, stopping the finishing touches on both suburban additions. Came rain and sleet and snow, and rain and sleet and snow again, then biting cold that sank deep into the ground and sealed it as if with a crust of iron. March, that had come in like a lamb, went out like a lion, and the lion raged through April and into May. Then, as suddenly as it had come, the belated winter passed away and the warm sun beat down upon the snow-clad hills and swept them clean. It penetrated into the valleys and turned them into rivulets, thousands of which poured into the river and swelled its banks brimming full. The streets of the Applerod Addition were quickly washed with their own white covering and dried, and immediately with

this break-up began the great advertising campaign. The papers flamed with full-page and half-page announcements of the wonderful home-making opportunity; circulars were mailed to possible home-buyers by the hundred thousand; every street-car told of the bargain on striking cards; immense electric signs blazoned the project by night; sixteen-sheet posters were spread upon all the bill-boards, and every device known to expert advertising was requisitioned. Not one soul within the city or within a radius of fifty miles but had kept constantly before him the duty he owed to himself to purchase a lot in the marvelous Applerod Addition; and now indeed Oliver P. Applerod, reassured once more, began to reap the fruit of his life's ambitions as prospective buyers thronged to look at his frock-coat and silk hat.

June the first was set for the date of the "grand opening," and though it was not to be a month of roses, still the earth looked bright and gay as the time approached, and Bobby Burnit took Agnes out to view his coming triumph. This was upon a bright day toward the end of May, when those yellow squares were tempered to a golden green by the tender young grass that had been sown at the completion of the grading. She had made frequent visits with him through the winter, and now she gloried with him.

"It looks fine, Bobby," she confessed with glowing

eyes. "Fine! It really seems as if you had won your spurs."

"Diamond-studded ones!" he exulted. "Why, Agnes, the office is besieged with requests for allotments. In spite of the fact that we have over eleven hundred lots for sale at an average price of six hundred dollars, we're not going to have enough to go around. The receipts will be fully seven hundred thousand dollars, and our complete disbursements, by the time we have sold out, will not amount to over two hundred and twenty-five thousand. Of course, I don't know—I haven't asked, and you wouldn't tell me if I did—just by what promises you are bound, but when I close up this deal you're going to marry me! That's flat!"

"You mustn't be too sure of anything in this world, Bobby," she warned him, but she turned upon him a smile that made her words but idle breath.

CHAPTER XI

BOBBY DISCOVERS AN ENEMY GREATER THAN SILAS TRIMMER

ONE circumstance only had occurred to give Bobby any anxiety. With the beginning of the thaw the water in Silas Trimmer's eight acres had begun slowly to rise, and he saw with some dismay that by far the larger part of the great natural basin from which the surface water had been supplied to this swamp sloped from the northern end. Not having that expanse of one hundred and twenty acres to spread over, it might overflow, and in considerable trepidation he sought Jimmy Platt. That happy young gentleman only smiled.

"I calculated upon that," he informed Bobby, "and built your retaining wall two feet higher than the normal spring level for that very reason. It will carry all the water than can shed down from those hills."

Relieved, Bobby went ahead with the preparations for turning the Applerod Addition into money, and though he saw the water creeping up steadily against

the other side of his wall, he displayed no anxiety until it had reached within three or four inches of the top. Then he took Platt out with him to have a look at it.

"Don't you think you ought to get busy?" he inquired. "Hadn't we better add another foot to this wall?"

"Not necessary," said Jimmy, shaking his head positively. "This has been an unusual spring, but the wet weather is all over now, and you can see by the water-mark where the level has gone down a half inch since morning. All the moisture that has been trickling down here during the past week has been from the thawing out of the frozen hillsides, but those slopes are almost dust dry now."

"Suppose it should rain again?" insisted Bobby, still worried.

"It couldn't rain hard enough to fill up these four inches," declared Platt with decision. "Look here, Mr. Burnit, I'd worry myself if there was any cause whatever. Do you suppose I'd want anything to happen to my biggest and best job so close to my wedding-day?"

"So you've set the time," said Bobby, with eager pleasure. He had met Platt's "best girl" and her mother out at the Addition, and liked her, as he did earnest young Platt.

"June the first," replied Jimmy exultantly. "The date of your opening—in the evening."

"Don't forget to send me an invitation."

"Will you come?" said Platt. He had wanted to ask Bobby before, but had not been quite sure that he ought.

"Come!" replied Bobby. "Indeed I shall—unless I happen to have a wedding of my own on that date."

Bobby went away satisfied once more, and quite willing to give up the additional foot of wall. The work would entail considerable cost, and expense now was much more of an item than it had been a few months previously. Already he had spent upon this project over two hundred and ten thousand dollars; ten thousand he had given to Biff Bates; ten thousand he had used personally, so there was but an insignificant portion left of his two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. Their "grand opening" would eat up another tidy little sum, for it was to be an expensive affair. The liberal advertising that had already appeared was augmented as the great day approached, a brass band had been engaged, a magnificent lunch, sufficient to feed an army, had been arranged for, and every available 'bus and carry-all and picnic wagon in the city had been secured to transport all comers, free of charge, from the end of the car line to the new Addition. The price of vehicles was high, however,

for Silas Trimmer had already engaged quite a number of them to run between the Applerod Addition and his own. During the week preceding June first, there had appeared, in the local papers, advertisements of about one-fourth the size that Bobby was using, calling attention to the opening of the Trimmer Addition, which was to be upon the same date.

On the evening of May twenty-ninth, Bobby found Silas pacing the top of the retaining wall which held in his swamp, and waited for the spider-like figure to come across and join him.

"Too bad you didn't come in with me, or sell me your property at a reasonable figure," said Bobby affably, willing, in spite of his recent bitter experience, to meet his competitor upon the same friendly grounds that he would a crack polo antagonist on the eve of contest. "It's a shame that this could not all have been improved at one time."

"I'd just as lief have my part of it the way it is," said Silas. "It's no good now, but it's as good as yours," and he climbed into his buggy and drove away laughing, leaving Bobby strangely dissatisfied and doubtful over that strange remark.

While he was still trying to unravel it, he noted that the water in Silas' pond, which but a day or so previously had been down to fully nine inches from the top, was now climbing rapidly upward again; and

there had been no rain for more than two weeks! The thing was inexplicable. He was still puzzling over this as he drove down the road and turned in at broad Burnit Avenue toward the club-house. The asphalt and the pavements were bone dry and as clean as a ball-room floor, and it seemed to him that the young grass was growing greener and higher here than anywhere.

Suddenly he ordered his chauffeur to stop the machine. He had just passed a lot where, amid the tufts of green, his eye had caught the glint of water. Running back to it he saw that the center of that lot was covered by a small pool scarcely half an inch deep, through which the grass was growing dankly. This, too, was queer, for the hot sun and strong breeze of the past few days should have dried up every vestige of moisture. He walked along the sidewalk, studying each of the lots in turn. Here and there he discovered other small pools, and every lot bore the appearance of having just been freshly and too liberally watered. He stepped from the pavement upon the earth, and to his surprise his foot sank into it to the depth of an inch or more. For a while he was deeply worried, but presently it flashed upon him that all this soil had been dumped into the marsh, displacing the water, and that in this process it had naturally become soaked through and through. Of course it would take

a long time to dry out and it would be all the better for its moisture. The rate at which grass was growing was proof enough of that.

On the next day, kept busy by the preparations for the big opening, Bobby did not get out to the Applerod Addition until evening again. As he neared it he met Silas Trimmer coming back in his buck-board, that false circle around his mouth very much in evidence.

"You ought to have had your opening yesterday. I'd have been tempted to buy a lot myself then," shouted Silas as he passed, and Bobby was sure that the tone was a mocking one.

Consumed with anxiety, he hurried on to see how Silas' swamp stood. Aghast, he found the level of the water a full inch higher than any point that it had ever before reached. Connecting this condition vaguely with that other phenomenon that he had noted, he whirled his runabout and ran back into Burnit Avenue. In twenty-four hours a remarkable change had been wrought. There were pools everywhere. The lot where he had first noticed it was now entirely covered with water, with barely the tips of the grass showing through. Frightened, he drove over the entire Addition, up one street and down another. In many places the lots were flooded. One entire block had become no more nor less than a pond. At other

points the water, carrying with it the yellow soil, was flowing over his beautiful clean sidewalks and spreading its stain upon his immaculate streets. The darkness alone drove him from that inspection, and then it occurred to him to send once more for Jimmy Platt. At the first suburban telephone station he tried for nearly an hour to locate his man, but in vain. Later he tried it from his club, but could not reach him. That night was a sleepless one, and the next morning's daybreak found him speeding out the roadway to the Applerod Addition.

Early as he was, however, he found young Platt there ahead of him and in despair. He had good cause. The whole north end of the Applerod Addition had turned black, and over the top of Bobby's now grimy cement wall poured a broad, dark sheet of the murky swamp-water which had stained it. The pond of Silas Trimmer had overflowed in spite of all Platt's confident figuring that it could not, and in spite of the fact that dry weather had prevailed for two solid weeks. That was the inexplicable part. Clear weather, and still the entire suburb was becoming practically submerged! With solid, dry soil surrounding it, wherever the eye could reach it had become but a morass of mud! Mud was smeared upon every path and every roadway, and Bobby's automobile slipped and slid in the oily, yellow liquid that lay

sluggishly in every gutter and blotched every rod of his clean asphalt.

Young Platt's face blanched as he saw Bobby.

"I've made a miserable botch of it," he confessed, torn with an agony of regret at his failure; "and I can't see yet what I overlooked. I'd no right to tackle a man's job like this!"

"You!" replied Bobby vehemently. "It was Trimmer who did this; somehow, someway he did it, and he flaunts it in our faces. Look there!" and he pointed to a huge signboard that had been erected overnight just opposite the entrance to Burnit Avenue. In huge, bold letters, surmounted by a giant hand that pointed the way, it told prospective investors to buy property in the high and dry Trimmer Addition, the words "High and Dry" being twice as large as any other lettering upon the board.

"It is surely a lot of nerve," admitted Platt, "but it is rank nonsense to say that the man had anything to do with this catastrophe. It would have been impossible. Let's look this thing over. Drive past the club-house to the extreme west side."

Once more they traversed the mud of Burnit Avenue, and upon the dry, sloping ground the young engineer, cursing his inexperience, alighted and walked along the edge of the property, seeking a solution to the mystery. Still perplexed, he ascended

the rising ground and looked musingly across at the yet swollen and clay-red river. Suddenly an exclamation escaped his lips.

"There's your enemy," he said to Bobby who had climbed up beside him, and pointed to the river. "The river bank, I am sure, must edge upon a tilted shale formation which dips just below this basin. Probably at all times some of the water from the river seeps down between two sand-separated layers of this formation to find its outlet in the marsh, and it is this water which, through a geological freak, has supplied that swamp for ages. In the spring, however, and in extraordinary flood times, it probably finds a higher and looser stratum, and rushes down here with all the force of a hydraulic stream. This spring it took it a long time to wet thoroughly all our made ground from the bottom upward. The frost, sinking deeper in this loose, wet soil than elsewhere, held it back, too, for a time, but as soon as this was thoroughly out of the ground the river overflow came up like a geyser.

"Mr. Burnit, your Applerod Addition is ruined, and it can never be saved, unless by some extraordinary means. Nature picked out this spot, centuries and centuries ago, for a swamp, and she's going to have one here in spite of all that we can do. In five years this basin won't be a thing but black

water and weeds, with only that club-house as a decaying monument to your enterprise."

Bobby controlled himself with an effort. His face was drawn and white; but part of that was from the anxiety of the past two days, and he took the blow stiff and erect, as a good soldier stands up to be disciplined. His eye roved over the work in which he had taken such pride, and already he could see in fancy the dank weeds growing up, and the croaking frogs diving into the oily surface, and the clouds of mosquitoes hovering over it again. Over the top of his retaining wall still poured the foul water which was to leaven all this, and he gazed upon it with a sharp intake of the breath.

"And to think that Silas Trimmer must have known all this, and led me to waste a fortune just so that he could reap the benefit of my advertising for his own vulture advantage!"

That, at first, was the part which hurt more than the overthrow of his plans, more than the loss of his money, more than the failure of his fight to carry out his father's wishes for his success: that any one could play the game so unfairly, that there could be in all the world people so detestable, so unprincipled, so *unsportsmanlike!*

Slowly the vanquished pair descended the hill to where the automobile stood upon the solid, level sward,

but before they climbed in Bobby shook hands with his engineer.

"Don't blame yourself too much, old man," he said. "It wasn't a condition that you could foresee, and I'm mighty sorry if it hurts your reputation."

"It ought to!" exclaimed Platt with deep self-revilement. "I should have investigated. I should not have taken anything for granted. I ought to have enough money so that you could sue me for damages and recover all you lost."

"It couldn't be done," said Bobby miserably. "I've lost so much more than money."

He did not tell Platt of Agnes, but that was the one thought into which all his failure had finally resolved. Agnes! How much longer must he wait for her? They had just passed the club-house when a light buggy turned into Burnit Avenue, driven furiously by a white-haired man in a white vest and a high silk hat.

"I accept your offer!" cried Applerod, as soon as he came within talking distance, his usually ruddy face now livid white.

"My offer," repeated Bobby wonderingly.

"Yes; your offer of ten thousand dollars for my share in the Applerod Addition."

Bobby was forced to laugh. It had needed but this to make the bitter jest of fortune complete.

"You refused that offer the day it was made, Applerod!" put in Platt indignantly. "I heard you. Anyhow, you dragged Mr. Burnit into this thing!"

"He's not to blame for that," said Bobby. "But still, I don't think I care to buy any more of this property." And he smiled grimly at the absurdity of it all.

"I'll sue you for it!" shrieked Applerod, frantic from thwarted self-interest. "You prevented me from selling out at a profit when I had a chance! You bound me hand and foot when I knew that if Silas Trimmer had anything to gain by it we would lose! He knew all the time that this swamp was fed by underground springs. He bragged about it to me this morning as I passed him on the road. He told me last night I'd better come out here this morning."

"I see," said Bobby coldly, and he reached for his lever.

"Then you won't hold good to your offer?" gasped the other.

Pale before, he had turned ashen now, and Bobby looked at him with quick compunction. Applerod, always so chubbily youthful for a man of his years, was grown suddenly old. He seemed to have shrunk inside his clothes, his face to have turned flabby, his eyes to have dimmed. After all, he was an old man, and the little that he had scraped together represented

all that he could hope to amass in a none too provident lifetime. This day made him a pauper and there was no chance for a fresh start. Bobby himself was young and strong, and, moreover, his resources were by no means exhausted.

"I'll tell you what I'll do, Applerod," said he, after a moment of very sober thought. "Your property cost you in the neighborhood of four thousand. Interest since the time you first began to invest in it would bring it up to a little more than that. I'll give you five thousand."

"I won't accept it.—Yes, I will! yes, I will!" he cried as Bobby impatiently reached again for his lever.

"Very well," said Bobby, "wait a minute." And tearing a leaf from his memorandum-book he wrote a note to Johnson to see to the transfer of the property and deliver to Applerod a check for five thousand dollars.

"That was more than generous; it was foolish," protested Jimmy Platt, as they whirled away.

"No doubt," admitted Bobby dryly. "But, if I'm forced to be a fool, I might as well have a well-finished job of it."

CHAPTER XII

AGNES DECIDES THAT SHE WILL WAIT

APPLEROD, his poise nearly recovered, bounded into the office where Johnson sat stolidly working away, his sense of personal contentedness enhanced by the presence of Biff Bates, who sat idly upon the flat-top desk, dangling his legs and waiting for Bobby. Mr. Applerod paid no attention whatever to Mr. Bates, that gentleman being quite beneath his notice, but with vast importance he laid down in front of Mr. Johnson the note which Bobby had given him.

"*Mr.* Johnson," he pompously directed, "you will please attend to this little matter as soon as possible."

"Applerod," said Johnson, glancing at the note and looking up with sudden fire, "does this mean that you are no longer even partially my employer?"

"That's it exactly."

"Then you, Applerod, don't you dare call me *Mr.* Johnson again!" And he shook a bony fist at his old-time work-fellow.

Biff Bates nearly fell off the desk, but with rare presence of mind restrained his glee.

Mr. Applerod, smiling loftily, immediately wielded his bludgeon.

"We should not quarrel over trifles," he stated commiseratingly. "We are once more companions in misfortune. There is no Applerod Addition. It is a swamp again."

"What do you mean?" asked Johnson incredulously, but suspending his indignation for the instant.

"This," said Applerod: "that the entire addition is a hundred-acre mud puddle this morning. You couldn't sell a lot in it to a blind man. Every cent that was invested in it is lost. The whole marsh was fed from underground springs that have come up through it and overflowed the place."

"Trimmer again," said Biff Bates, and slid off the desk; then he looked at his watch with a curious speculative smile.

"But if it is all lost," protested Johnson, looking again at the note and pausing in the making out of the check, "how do you come to get this?"

"He owed it to me," asserted Applerod. "I wanted to sell out when I first found that we were competing with Silas Trimmer, and young Burnit kept me from it by an injunction. He offered me ten thousand dollars for my interest once, but this morning when

I went to accept that offer he would only give me this five thousand. It's just five thousand dollars that he's robbed me of."

"*Robbed!*" shrilled Johnson, jumping from his chair. "Applerod, you weigh a hundred and eighty pounds and I weigh a hundred and thirty-seven, but I can lick you the best day you ever lived; and by thunder and blazes! if you let fall another remark like that I'll knock your infernal head off!"

Mr. Johnson had on no coat, but he felt the urgent need to remove something, so he tore off one false sleeve, wadded it up in a little ball and slammed it on the floor with great vigor, tore off the other one, wadded it up and slammed that down. Biff Bates, quivering with joy, rang loudly upon a porcelain electric-light shade with his pencil and called: "Time!"

There was no employment for a referee, however, for Mr. Applerod, with astonishing agility, sprang to the door and held it half open, ready for a hurried exit in case of any other demonstration. It was shocking to think that he might be drawn into an undignified altercation—and with a mere clerk! Also, it might be dangerous.

"Nothing doing, chum," said Biff Bates disgustedly to his friend Johnson. "This bunch of mush-ripe bananas ain't even a quitter. He's a never-beginner.

But you'll do fine, old scout. Come along with me. I got a treat for you."

Mr. Johnson, breathing scorn that alternately dented and inflated his nostrils, slowly donned his coat and hat without removing his eyes from Applerod, who, as the two approached the door, edged uncertainly away from it.

"I've got to go out, anyhow," said Johnson, addressing his remarks exclusively to Mr. Bates, but his glare exclusively to Mr. Applerod. "I'm going to put this check into the hands of Mr. Chalmers, so Mr. Robert don't get cheated by any yellow-livered *snake in the grass!*" And he spit out those last violent words with a sudden vehemence which made Mr. Applerod drop his shiny hat.

When Bobby came into the office a few minutes later he found Applerod, his hat upon his lap, waiting in one of the customers' chairs with stiff solemnity.

"Why aren't you at your desk, Applerod?" asked Bobby sharply. "You have an immense amount of unopened mail, and some of it may contain checks which will have to be sent back."

"Mr. Burnit," said Mr. Applerod, rising with great dignity and throwing back his shoulders, "I consider myself no longer in your employ. I have resigned."

Bobby looked at him thoughtfully and weighed

rapidly in his mind a great many things. He remembered that his father had once said of the two men: "Johnson has a pea-green liver and is a pessimist, but he is honest. Applerod suffers from too much health and is an optimist, and I presume him to be honest, but I never tested it." Yet his father had seen fit to keep Applerod in his intimate employ all these years, recognizing in him material of value. Moreover, he had advised Bobby to keep both men, and Bobby, to-day more than ever, placed great faith in the wisdom of his father.

"Mr. Applerod," said he, "I dislike to be harsh with you, but if you don't put up your hat and get at that bundle of mail I shall be compelled to consider discharging you. Where's Johnson?"

"He went out with Mr. Bates, sir."

When Bobby left, Applerod was industriously sorting the mail on his desk, preparing to open it.

Bobby let himself into the big new gymnasium and walked back through the deserted hall to the small room that was used for individual training. As he neared the door he could hear the sound of loud voices and the shuffling of feet, and heard the commanding voice of Biff Bates shout "Break!"

The door was locked, but through the slide window at the side a strange tableau met his eyes. Stooped and lean Johnson, as chalk-white of face as ever, had

paunchy and thin-legged Silas Trimmer by the collar, and over Biff Bates' intervening body was trying to rain blows into the center of the circular smile, now flattened to an oval of distress.

"Break, Johnson, break!" begged Biff. "Don't put him out till you feed him all he's got coming." Thereupon he succeeded in extracting Mr. Trimmer from the grasp of Mr. Johnson and forced the former back upon a chair, where he began to fan him with a towel in most approved fashion.

"Let me out of this!" gasped Mr. Trimmer. "I'll have you arrested for assault and conspiracy."

"They'll only pinch a corpse, for the cops'll find me tickled to death when they get here," responded Mr. Bates gaily. "Now you're all right. Get up!"

"Let me out of this, I say!" commanded Mr. Trimmer frantically. "I'll run you into the penitentiary! I'll break you up in business! I'll hire thugs to break every bone in your body!"

"Is that all?" inquired Biff complacently, and grabbed him as he started to run around the room in a wild hunt for an outlet. "Stand up here and put up a fight or I'll punch you myself. I've been aching to do it for a year. That's why I got Doc Willets to dope it out to you that you was dyin' for training, and why I kept shifting your hour to when there was nobody here. Go to him, chum!"

Then ensued the strangest sparring match that the grinning and stealthily silent Bobby had ever seen. Johnson, with a true "tiger crouch" which he could not have avoided if he had wished, began dancing around and around the spherical body of Mr. Trimmer, without science and without precaution, keeping his two arms going like windmills, and occasionally landing a light blow upon some portion of Mr. Trimmer's unresisting anatomy; but finally a whirl so vigorous that it sent Johnson spinning upon his own heel, landed squarely beneath the jaw of Silas. That gentleman, with a puffed eye and a bleeding lip and two teeth gone, rose from his feet with the impact of the blow, and landed with a grunt in a huge basket of soiled bath-towels.

"Johnson," called the laughter-shaken voice of Bobby through the window, "I'm ashamed of you!"

Mr. Johnson looked up happily from his task of wiping away a little trickle of blood from his already swollen nose.

"Did you see me do it?" he demanded, thrilling with pride. "Mr. Burnit, I—I never had so much fun in my life. Never, never! By the way, sir," and even upon that triumphant moment his duty obtruded, "I have a letter for you that I brought away from the office," and through the window he handed one of the inevitable gray envelopes. It was inscribed:

To My Son, Upon the Failure of Applerod's Swamp Scheme

"In the midst of pleasure we are in pain," murmured Bobby, and tore open the letter. In it he read:

"My Dear Boy:

"A man must not only examine a business proposition from all sides, but must also turn it over and look well at the bottom. I never knew what was the matter with that swamp scheme, except Applerod, but I didn't want to know any more. You did.

"Well, you don't need wisdom. I've put one-half your fortune where it will yield you a living income. Try to cut at least one eye-tooth with the other half. Your trustee is instructed to give you another start.

"YOUR LOVING FATHER."

His trustee! Once more he must face her with failure; go to her beaten, and accept through her hands the means to gain himself another buffeting. He had not the heart to see her now, but he was not turned altogether coward, for leaving the scene of the late conflict abruptly, all its humor spoiled for him, he telephoned her what had happened and that he would be out in the evening.

"No, you must come now. I want you," she gently

insisted, and when he had come to her she went directly to him and put both her hands upon his shoulders.

"It wasn't fair, Bobby; it wasn't fair!" she cried. "None of it is fair, and your father had no right to bind me down with promises when you need me so. I'm willing to break them all. Bobby, I'll marry you to-morrow if you say so."

He drew a long, trembling breath, and then he put his hands gently upon both her cheeks and kissed her on the forehead.

"Let's don't," he said simply. "I have my own blood up now, and I want to take this other chance. I want to play the game out to the end. You'll wait, won't you?"

She looked up at him through moist eyes. He was so big and so strong and so good, and already through the past year of earnest purpose there had come firm, new lines upon his face, lines that meant something in the ultimate building of character; and she recognized that perhaps stern old John Burnit had been right after all.

"Indeed, I can wait," she whispered. "Proudly, Bobby."

CHAPTER XIII

IN WHICH A CHARMING GENTLEMAN OFFERS AN INVESTMENT WITHOUT A FLAW

IT was pretty, in the succeeding days, to see Agnes poring over advertisements and writing down long lists of suggested enterprises for investigation, enterprises which proved in every case to be in the midst of an already too thickly contested field, or to be hampered by monopoly, or subject to some other vital drawback. There seemed to be a strange dearth of safe and suitable commercial ventures, a fact over which Bobby and Agnes together puzzled almost nightly. There was to be no false start this time; no stumbling in the middle of the race; no third failure. The third time was to be the charm. And yet too much time must not be wasted. They both began to feel rather worried about this.

Of course, there was a letter, in the familiar gray envelope. It had been handed to Bobby by Johnson upon the day the second check for two hundred and fifty thousand had been paid over by Chalmers upon Agnes' order, and it read:

To My Son Robert,
Upon His Third Attempt to Make Money

"The man who has never failed has been either too lucky or too timid to have much tried and tested worth. The man who always fails is too useless to talk about. As you've failed twice you're neither too lucky nor too timid. It remains to be seen if you are too useless.

"Remember that money isn't the only audible thing in this world; but it makes more noise than anything else. A vast number of people call money vulgar; but, if you'll notice, this opinion is chiefly held by those who haven't been able to secure any of it.

"I wouldn't have you sacrifice any decent principle to get it, because that is not necessary; but go get money of your own, and see what a difference there is between dollars. A dollar you've made is as different from a dollar that's given to you as your children are from other people's."

"If only the governor had pointed out some good business for me to go into," complained Bobby as he read this letter over with Agnes.

She shook her head soberly. She realized, more than he possibly could, as yet, just where Bobby's weaknesses lay. She had worried over them not a little, of late, and she was just as anxious as old John Burnit had been to have him correct those defects; and she, like Bobby's father, was only thankful

that they were not defects of manliness, of courage or of moral or mental fiber. They were only defects of training, for which the elder Burnit, as he had himself confessed, was responsible.

"That isn't what he wanted at all, Bobby," she protested. "The very fact of your two past failures shows just how right he was in making you find out things for yourself. The chief trouble, I am afraid, is that you have been too ready to furnish the money and let others spend it for you."

"I know," said Bobby. "I have been too willing to take everybody's word, I guess; but I have always been able to do that in my crowd, and it is rather a dash to me to find that in business you can not do it. However, I have reformed."

He said this so self-confidently that Agnes laughed.

"Yes," she admitted, "you are convinced that Silas Trimmer is a thief and a rascal, and you would not take his word for anything. You are convinced that Applerod's judgment is useless and that your own does not amount to much, but I still believe that the next plausible looking and plausible talking man who comes to you can engage you in any business that seems fair on the surface."

"I deserve what you say," he confessed, but somewhat piqued, nevertheless. "However, I don't think you are giving me credit for having learned any les-

son at all. Why, only to-day you ought to have heard me turning down a proposition to finance a new and improved washing-machine. Sounded very good and feasible, too. The man was a good talker and thoroughly earnest and honest, I am sure. I really did want to help the fellow start his business, but somehow or other I could not seem to like the idea of washing-machines; such a sudsy sort of business."

Agnes laughed the sort of a laugh that always made him want to catch hold of her, but if he had any intentions in that respect they were interfered with just now by Uncle Dan, who strolled into the parlor in his dressing-jacket and with a cigar tilted in the corner of his mouth.

"How's the Commercial Board of Strategy coming on?" he inquired as he offered Bobby a cigar.

"Fine!" declared Bobby; "except that it can not think of a strategem."

"I think you are very selfish not to help us out, Uncle Dan," declared Agnes. "With all your experience you ought to be able to suggest something for Bobby to go into that would be a nice business and perfectly safe and make him lots of money without requiring too much experience to start with."

"Young lady," said Uncle Dan severely, "if I knew a business of that kind I'd sell some of the stock of my factory and go into it myself; but I don't. The

fact is, there are no business snaps lying around loose. You have to make one, and that takes not just money, but work and brains."

"I'm perfectly willing to work," declared Bobby.

"And you don't mean to say that he hasn't brains!" objected Agnes.

"No-o-o," admitted Uncle Dan. "I am quite sure that Bobby has brains, but they have not been quite —a—a—well, say solidified, yet. You're not allowed to smoke in this parlor, Bobby. Mrs. Elliston wants a quiet home game of whist; sent me to bring you up."

Secretly, old Dan Elliston was himself puzzling a great deal over a career for Bobby, but up to the moment had not found anything that he thought safe to propose. Not having a good idea he was averse to discussing any project whatsoever, and so, each time that he was consulted upon the subject, he was as evasive as this about it, and Bobby each morning dragged perplexedly into the handsome offices of the defunct Applerod Addition, where Applerod and Johnson were still working a solid eight hours a day to straighten out the affairs of that unfortunate venture.

Those offices were the dullest quarters Bobby knew, for they contained nothing but the dead ashes of bygone money; but one morning business picked up

with a jerk. He found a mine investment agent awaiting him when he arrived, and before he was through with this clever conversationalist a man was in to get him to buy a racing stable. Affairs grew still more brisk as the morning wore on. Within the next two hours he had politely but firmly declined to buy a partnership in a string of bucket shops, to refinance a defunct irrigation company, to invest in a Florida plantation, to take a tip on copper, and to back an automobile factory which was to enter business upon some designs of a new engine stolen by a discharged workman.

"How did all these people find out that I have two hundred and fifty thousand dollars to invest?" impatiently demanded Bobby, after he had refused the allurements of a patent-medicine scheme, the last of that morning's lot.

There followed a dense silence, in the midst of which old Johnson looked up from the book in which he was entering a long, long list of items on the wrong side of the profit and loss account, and jerked his lean thumb angrily in the direction of Applerod.

"Ask him," he said.

Chubby-faced old Applerod, excessively meek of spirit to-day, suffered a moment of embarrassment under the accusing eyes of young Burnit.

"The newspapers, sir," he admitted, twisting un-

comfortably in his swivel chair. "The reporters were here yesterday afternoon with the idea that since you haven't announced any future plans, the failure of our real estate scheme—*my* real estate scheme," he corrected in response to a snort and a glare from Johnson—"had left you penniless. Of course I wasn't going to let them go away with that impression, so I told them that you had another two hundred and fifty thousand dollars to invest, with probably more to follow, if necessary."

"And of course," groaned Bobby, "it is all in print, with ingenious trimmings."

From a drawer in his desk Johnson quietly drew copies of the morning papers, each one folded carefully to an article in which, under wide variations of embarrassing head-lines, the facts of Bobby's latest frittering of his father's good money were once more facetitiously, even gleefully, set forth and embellished, with added humorous speculations as to how he would probably cremate his new fund. Bobby was about to turn into his own room to absorb his humiliation in secret when Applerod hesitantly stopped him.

"Another thing, sir," he said. "Mr. Frank L. Sharpe called up early this morning to know when he would find you in, and I took the liberty of telling him that you would very likely be here at ten o'clock."

Bobby frowned slightly at the mention of that name. He knew of Sharpe vaguely as a man whose private life had been so scandalous that society had ceased to shudder at his name—it simply refused to hear it; a man who had even secured advancement by obligingly divorcing his first wife so that the notorious Sam Stone could marry her.

"What did he want?" he asked none too graciously.

"I don't know, sir," said Applerod; "but he telephoned me again just as you were getting rid of this last caller. I told him that you were here and he said that he would be right over."

Bobby made no reply to this, but went thoughtfully into his room and closed the door after him. In less than five minutes the door opened, and Mr. Applerod, his voice fairly oily with obsequiousness, announced Mr. Frank L. Sharpe! Why, here is a man whose name was in the papers every morning, noon and night! Mr. Sharpe had taken a trip to New York on behalf of the Gas Company; Mr. Sharpe had returned from his trip to New York on behalf of the Gas Company; Mr. Sharpe had entertained at the Hotel Spender; Mr. Sharpe had made a speech; Mr. Sharpe had been interviewed; Mr. Sharpe had been indisposed for half a day!

Quite prepossessing of appearance was Mr. Sharpe; a tall, rather slight gentleman, whose fea-

tures no one ever analyzed because the eyes of the observer stopped, fascinated, at his mustache. That wonderful adornment was wonderfully luxuriant, gray and curly, pretty to an extreme, and kept most fastidiously trimmed, and it lifted when he smiled to display a most engaging row of white, even teeth. Centered upon this magnificent combination the gaze never roved to the animal nose, to the lobeless ears, to the watery blue eyes half obscured by the lower lids. He was immaculately, though a shade too youthfully, dressed in a gray frock suit, with pearl-gray spats upon his shoes, and he was most charmed to see young Mr. Burnit.

"You have a very neat little suite of offices here, Mr. Burnit," he commented, seating himself gracefully and depositing his gray hat, his gray cane and his gray gloves carefully to one side of him upon Bobby's desk.

"I'm afraid they are a little too nice for practical purposes," Bobby confessed. "I have found that business isn't a parlor game."

"Precisely what I came to see you about," said Mr. Sharpe. "I understand you have been a trifle unfortunate, but that is because you did not go into the regular channels. An established and paying corporation is the only worth-while proposition, and if you have not yet settled upon an investment I would

like to suggest that you become interested in our local Brightlight Electric Company."

"I thought there was no gas or electric stock for sale," said Bobby slowly, clinging still to a vague impression that he had gained five or six years before.

"Not to the public," replied Mr. Sharpe, smiling, "and there would not have been privately except for the necessity of a reorganization. The Brightlight needs more capital for expansion, and I have too many other interests, even aside from the Consumers' Electric Light and Power and the United Gas and Fuel Companies, to spare the money myself—and the Brightlight is too good to let the general public in on." He smiled again, quite meaningly this time. "This is quite confidential, of course," he added.

Bobby bowed his acknowledgment of the confidence which had been reposed in him, and generously began at once to reconstruct his impressions of the impossible Mr. Sharpe. You couldn't believe all you heard, you know.

"The Brightlight," went on Mr. Sharpe, "is at present capitalized for two hundred and fifty thousand dollars, and is a good ten-per-cent.-dividend-paying stock at the present moment; but its business is not growing, and I propose to take in sufficient capital to raise the Brightlight to a half-million-dollar corporation, clear off its indebtedness and project

certain extensions. I understand that you have the necessary amount, and here is the proposition I offer you. Brightlight stock is now quoted at a hundred and seventy-two. We will double its present capitalization, and you may take up the extra two hundred and fifty thousand dollars' worth of its stock at par, or about three-fifths of its actual value. That is a bargain to be snapped at, Mr. Burnit."

Did Bobby Burnit snap at this proposition? He did not. Bobby had learned caution through his two bitter failures, and of caution is born wisdom.

"Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars' worth of stock in a five-hundred-thousand-dollar corporation won't do for me," he declared with a firmness that was pleasant to his own ears. "I don't care to go into any proposition in which I have not the controlling interest."

Mr. Sharpe, remembering the details of Bobby's Trimmer and Company experiment, hastily turned his imminent smile of amusement into a merely engaging one.

"I don't blame you, Mr. Burnit," said he; "but to show you that I am more willing to trust you than you are to trust me, if you care to go into this thing I'll agree to sell you from one to ten shares of my individual stock—at its present market value, of course."

"That's very good of you," agreed Bobby, suddenly ashamed of his ungenerous stand in the face of this sportsmanlike attitude. "But really I've had cause for timidity."

"Caution is not cowardice," said Mr. Sharpe in a tone which conveyed a world of friendly approbation. "This matter must be taken up very soon, however, and I can not allow you more than a week to investigate. I'd be pleased to receive your legal and business advisers at any time you may nominate, and to give them any advantage you may wish."

"I'll investigate it at least, and I thank you for giving me the opportunity," said Bobby, really very contrite that he had been doing Sharpe such a mental injustice all these years. "By the way," he suddenly added, "has Silas Trimmer anything whatever to do with this proposition?"

Mr. Sharpe smiled.

"Mr. Trimmer does not own one share of stock in the Brightlight Electric Company, nor will he own it," he answered.

"In that case," said Bobby, "I am satisfied to consider your offer without fear of heart-disease."

The departing caller met an incoming one in the outer office, and Agnes, sweeping into Bobby's room, breathlessly gasped:

"That was Frank Sharpe!"

"The same," admitted Bobby, smiling down at her and taking both her hands.

"I never saw him so closely," she declared. "Really, he's quite distinguished-looking."

"As long as he avoids a close shave," supplemented Bobby. "But what brings you into the—the busy marts of trade so early in the morning?"

"My trusteeship," she answered him loftily, producing some documents from her hand-bag. "And I'm in a hurry. Sign them papers."

"Them there papers," he kindly corrected, and seating himself at his desk he examined the minor transfers perfunctorily and signed them.

"I'm afraid I'm a failure as a trustee," she told him. "I ought to have had more power. I ought to have been authorized to keep you out of bad company. How came Mr. Sharpe to call on you, for instance?"

"To make my fortune," he gravely assured her. "Mr. Sharpe wants me to go into the Brightlight Electric Company with him."

"I can imagine your courteous adroitness in putting the man back in his place," she laughed. "How preposterous! Why, he's utterly impossible!"

"Ye-e-es?" questioned Bobby. "But you know, Agnes, this isn't a pink-tea affair. It's business, which is at the other end of the world."

"You're not honestly defending him, Bobby?" she

protested incredulously. "Why, I do believe you are considering the man seriously!"

"Why not?" he persisted, arguing against his own convictions as much as against hers. "We want me to make some money, don't we? To make a success that will let me marry you?"

"I'm not to say so, remember," she reminded him.

"Father put no lock on my tongue, though," he reminded her in turn; "so I'll just lay down the dictum that as soon as I succeed in any one business deal I'm going to marry you, and I don't care whether the commodity I handle is electricity or potatoes."

"But Frank L. Sharpe!" she exclaimed, with shocked remembrance of certain whispered stories she had heard.

"Really, I don't see where he enters into it," persisted Bobby. "The Brightlight Electric Company is a stock corporation, in which Mr. Sharpe happens to own some shares; that is all."

She shook her head.

"I can't seem to like it," she told him, and rose to go.

The door opened, and Johnson, with much solemnity, though in his eyes there lurked a twinkle, brought in a card which, with much stiff ceremony, he handed to Bobby.

"Professor Henry H. Bates," read Bobby in some

perplexity, then suddenly his brow cleared and he laughed uproariously. "Come right in, Biff," he called.

In response to this invitation there entered upon Agnes' vision a short, chunky, broad-shouldered young man in a checked green suit and red tie, who, finding himself suddenly confronted by a dazzlingly beautiful young lady, froze instantly into speechless awkwardness.

"This is my friend and partner, Mr. Biff—Mr. Henry H. Bates—Miss Elliston," introduced Bobby, smiling.

Agnes held out her hand, which suddenly seemed to dwindle in size as it was clasped by the huge palm of Mr. Bates.

"I have heard so much of you from Mr. Burnit, and always nice things," she said, smiling at him so frankly that Mr. Bates, though his face flushed red, instantly thawed.

"Bobby's right there with the boost," commented Mr. Bates, and then, not being quite satisfied with that form of speech, he huskily corrected it to: "Burnit's always handing out those pleasant words." This form of expression seeming also to be somewhat lacking in polish, he relapsed into more redness, and wiped the strangely moist palms of his hands upon the sides of his coat.

"He doesn't talk about any but pleasant people," Agnes assured him.

After she had gone Mr. Bates looked dazedly at the door through which she had passed out, then turned to Bobby.

"Carries a full line of that conversation," he commented, "but I like to fall for it. And say! I'll bet she's game all right; the kind that would stick to a guy when he was broke, in jail and had the smallpox. That's your steady, ain't it, Bobby?"

Coming from any one else this query might have seemed a trifle blunt, but Bobby understood precisely how Mr. Bates meant it, and was gratified.

"She's the real girl," he admitted.

"I'm for her," stoutly asserted Mr. Bates, as he extracted a huge wad of crumpled bills from his trousers pocket. "Any old time she wants anybody strangled or stabbed and you ain't handy, she can call on your friend Biff. Here's your split of last month's pickings at the gym. One hundred and eighty-one large, juicy simoleons; count 'em, one hundred and eighty-one!" And he threw the money on the desk.

"Everything paid?" asked Bobby.

"Here's the receipts," and from inside his vest Mr. Bates produced them. "Ground rent, light, heat, payroll, advertising, my own little old weekly envelope

and everything; and I got one-eighty-one in my other kick for my share."

"Very well," said Bobby; "you just put this money of mine into a fund to buy further equipments when we need them."

"Nit and nix; also no!" declared Mr. Bates emphatically. "This time the bet goes as she lays. You take a real money drag-down from now on."

"Mr. Johnson," called Bobby through the open door, "please take charge of this one hundred and eighty-one dollars, and open a separate account for my investment in the Bates Athletic Hall. It might be, Biff," he continued, turning to Mr. Bates, "that yours would turn out to be the only safe business venture I ever made."

"It ain't no millionaire stunt, but it sure does pay a steady divvy," Mr. Bates assured him. "I see a man outside scraping the real-estate sign off the door. Is he going to paint a new one?"

"I don't know," said Bobby, frowning. "I shall, of course, get into something very shortly, but I've not settled on anything as yet. The best thing that has turned up so far is an interest in the Brightlight Electric Company offered me to-day by Frank L. Sharpe."

"What!" shrieked Biff in a high falsetto, and slapped himself smartly on the wrist. "Has he been

here? I thought it seemed kind of close. Give me a cigarette till I fumigate."

"What's the matter with the Brightlight Electric Company?" demanded Bobby.

"Nothing. It's a cinch so far as I know. But Sharpe! Why, say, Bobby, all the words I'd want to use to tell you about him have been left out of the dictionary so they could send it through the mails."

Bobby frowned. The certain method to have him make allowances for a man was to attack that man. When he arrived at the Idlers' Club at noon, however, he was given another opportunity for Christian charity. Nick Allstyne and Payne Winthrop and Stanley Rogers were discussing something with great indignation when he joined them, and Nick drew him over to the bulletin board, where was displayed the application of Frank L. Sharpe, proposed by Clarence Smythe, Silas Trimmer's son-in-law, and seconded by another undesirable who had twice been posted for non-payment of dues.

"There is only one thing about this that commends itself to me, and that is the immaculate and colossal nerve of the proceeding," declared Nick indignantly. "The next thing you know somebody will propose Sam Stone."

At this they all laughed. The Idlers' Club was the one institution that stood in no awe of the notori-

ous "boss" of the city and of the state; a man who had never held an office, but who, until the past two years, had controlled all offices; whose methods were openly dishonest; who held underground control of every public utility and a score of private enterprises. The idea of Stone as an applicant for membership in the Idlers' Club was a good joke, but the actual application of Sharpe was too serious for jesting. Nevertheless, all this turmoil over the mere name of the man worked a strange reaction in Bobby Burnit.

"After all, business is business," he declared to himself, "and I don't see where Sharpe's personality figures in this Brightlight Electric deal, especially since I am to have control."

Accordingly he directed Chalmers and Johnson to make a thorough investigation of that corporation.

CHAPTER XIV

BOBBY ENTERS A BUSINESS ALLIANCE, A SOCIAL ENTANGLEMENT AND A QUARREL WITH AGNES

THE report of Mr. Johnson and Mr. Chalmers upon the Brightlight Electric Company was a complicated affair, but, upon the whole, highly favorable. It was an old establishment, the first electric company that had been formed in the city, and it held, besides some minor concessions, an ancient franchise for the exclusive supply of twelve of the richest down-town blocks, this franchise, made by a generous board of city fathers, still having twenty years to run. The concern's equipment was old and much of it needed renewal, but its financial affairs were in good shape, except for a mortgage of a hundred thousand dollars held by one J. W. Williams.

"About this mortgage," Mr. Chalmers advised Mr. Burnit; "its time limit expires within two months, and I have no doubt that is why Sharpe wants to put additional capital into the concern. Moreover, Williams

is notoriously reputed a lieutenant of Sam Stone's, and it is quite probable that Stone is the real holder of the mortgage."

"I don't see where it makes much difference, so long as the mortgage has to be paid, whether it is paid to Stone or to somebody else," said Bobby reflectively.

"I don't see any difference myself," agreed Chalmers, "except that I am suspicious of that whole crowd, since Sharpe is only a figurehead for Stone. I find that Sharpe is credited with holding two hundred thousand dollars' worth of the present stock. The majority of the Consumers Company and a good share of the United are also in his name. Just how all these facts have a bearing upon each other I can not at present state, but in view of the twenty years' franchise, and of the fact that you will hold undisputed control, I do not see but that you have a splendid investment here. The contract for the city lighting of those twelve blocks is ironclad, and the franchise for exclusive private lighting and power is exclusive so long as 'reasonably satisfactory service' is maintained. As this has been undisputed for thirty years I don't think you need have much fear upon that score," and Chalmers smiled.

In the afternoon of that same day Sharpe called up.

"What dinner engagement have you for to-night?" he inquired.

"None," replied Bobby, after a moment of hesitation.

"Then I want you to dine with me at the Spender. Can you make it?"

"I guess so," replied Bobby reluctantly, after another hesitant pause. "What time, say?"

"About seven. Just inquire at the desk. I'll have a dining-room reserved."

Bobby was very thoughtful as he arrayed himself for dinner, and he was still more thoughtful when, a boy ushering him into the cozy little private dining-room, he found the over-dazzling young Mrs. Sharpe with her husband. She greeted the handsome young Mr. Burnit most effusively, clasping his hand warmly and rolling up her large eyes at him while Mr. Sharpe looked on with smiling approval. Bobby experienced that strange conflict which most men have known, a feeling of revulsion at war with the undoubted lure of the women. She was one of those who deliberately make appeal through their feminity alone.

"Such a pleasure to meet you," she said in the most silvery of voices. "I have heard so much of Mr. Burnit and his polo skill."

"It's the best trick I do," confessed Bobby, laughing.

"That's because Mr. Burnit hasn't found his proper forte as yet," interposed Sharpe. "He was really cut out for the illuminating business." And he led the way to the table, upon which Bobby had already noted that five places were laid.

"A couple of our friends might drop in," said the host in explanation; "they usually do."

"If it's Sam and Billy we're not going to wait for them," said Mrs. Sharpe with a languishing glance at Bobby. "They're always ages and ages late, if they come at all. Frank, where are those cocktails? I'm running down."

She took the drink with an avidity Bobby was not used to seeing among his own women friends, and almost immediately it heightened her vivacity. There could be no question that she was a fascinating woman. Again Bobby had that strange sense of revulsion, and again he was conscious that, in spite of her trace of a tendency to indecorum, there was a subtle appeal in her; one, however, that he shrank from analyzing. Her talk was mostly of the places she had been, with almost pathetic little mention now and then of unattainable people. Evidently she craved social position, in spite of the fact that she was for ever shut out from it.

While they were upon the fish the door opened and two men came in. With a momentary frown Bobby

recognized both; one of them the great Sam Stone, and the other William Garland, a rich young cigar manufacturer, quite prominent in public affairs. The latter he had met; the former he inspected quite curiously as he acknowledged the introduction.

Stone gave one the idea that he was extremely heavy; not that he was so grossly stout, although he was large, but he seemed to convey an impression of tremendous weight. His features and his expression were heavy, his eyes were heavy-lidded, and he was taciturnity itself. He gave Bobby a quick scrutiny from head to foot, and in that instant had weighed him, measured him, catalogued and indexed him for future reference for ever. Stone's only spoken word had been a hoarse acknowledgment of his introduction, and as soon as the entrée came on he attacked it with a voracious appetite, which, however, did not prevent him from weighing and absorbing in silence every word that was spoken in his hearing. Bobby found himself wondering how this unattractive man could have secured his tremendous following, in spite of the fact that Stone "never broke a promise and never went back on a friend," qualities which would go far toward establishing any man in the esteem of mankind.

It was not until the appearance of the salad that any allusion was made to business, and then Garland,

upon an impatient signal from Stone, turned to Bobby with the suavity of which he was thorough master.

"Mr. Sharpe tells me that you consider taking a dip into the public utilities line," he suggested.

Instantly three of them bent an attention upon Bobby so straight that it might have been palpable even to him, had not Stone suddenly lighted a match to attract their attention, and glared at them.

"I have already decided," said Bobby frankly, seeing no reason for fencing. "My legal and business advisers tell me that it would be a good investment, and I am ready to take hold of the Brightlight Electric as soon as the formalities can be arranged."

Stone grunted his approval, and immediately rose, looking at his watch.

"Pleased to have met you, Mr. Burnit," he rumbled hoarsely, and took his coat and hat. "Sorry I can't stay. Promised to meet a man."

"Coming back?" asked Garland.

"Might," responded the other, and was gone.

As soon as Stone had left, the trifle of strain that had been apparent prior to Bobby's very decided statement that he would go into the business, was lifted; and Mrs. Sharpe, pink of cheek and sparkling of eye and exhilarated by the wine to her utmost of purely physical attractiveness, moved when the coffee was served to a chair between Bobby and Garland,

and, gifted with a purring charm, exerted herself to the utmost to please the new-comer. She puzzled Bobby. The woman was an entirely new type to him, and he could not fathom her.

With the clearing of the table more champagne was brought, and Bobby began to have an uneasy dread of a "near-orgie," such as was associated in the minds of the knowing ones with this crowd. Sharpe, however, quickly removed this fear, for, pushing aside his own glass with a bare sip after it had been filled, he drew forth a pencil and produced some papers which he spread before Bobby.

"I imagined that you would have a very favorable report on the Brightlight Electric," he said with a smile, "so I took the liberty of bringing along an outline of my plan for reorganization. If Mr. Garland and Mrs. Sharpe will excuse us for talking shop we might glance over them together."

"You're selfish," pouted Mrs. Sharpe quite prettily, but, nevertheless, she turned her exclusive attention to Garland for the time being.

With considerable interest Bobby plunged into the business at hand. Here was a well-established concern that had been doing business for three decades, which had been paying ten per cent. dividends for years, and which would doubtless continue to do so for many years to come. An opportunity to ob-

tain control of it solved his problem of investment at once, and he strove to approach its intricacies with intelligence. He became vaguely aware, by and by, that just behind him Garland and Mrs. Sharpe were carrying on a most animated conversation in an undertone interspersed with much laughter, and once, with a start of annoyance, he overheard Garland telling a slightly *risqué* story, at which Mrs. Sharpe laughed softly and with evident relish. He glanced around involuntarily. Garland had his arm across the back of her chair, and they were leaning toward each other in a close proximity which Bobby reflected with sudden savageness could not possibly occur if that were his wife; nor was he much softened by the later reflection that, in the first place, a woman of her type never could have been his wife, and that, in the second place, it was not the man who was to blame, nor the woman so much, as Sharpe himself. Indeed, Bobby somehow gained the impression that the others flouted and despised Sharpe and held him as a weakling.

His glance was but a fleeting one, and he turned from them with a look which Sharpe, noting, misinterpreted.

"I had hoped," he said, "to go into this thing very thoroughly, so that we could begin the reorganization at once, with the preliminaries completely under-

stood; but if we are detaining you from any engagement, Mr. Burnit—"

"Not at all, not at all," the highly-interested Bobby hastened to assure him. "I have no engagements whatever to-night, and my time is entirely at your disposal."

"Then let's drop down to the theater," suddenly interposed Mrs. Sharpe. "You can talk your dust-dry business there just as well as here. Billy, telephone down to the Orpheum and see if they have a box."

Bobby was far too unsuspecting to understand that he had been deliberately trapped. Though not of the ultra-exclusives, his social position was an excellent one and he had the entrée everywhere. To be seen publicly with young Burnit was a step upward, as Mrs. Sharpe saw it, in that forbidding and painful social climb.

Bobby started with dismay when Garland stepped to the telephone, but he was fairly caught, and he realized it in time to check the involuntary protest that rose to his lips. He had acknowledged that his time was free and at their disposal, and he regretted deeply that no good, handy lie came to his rescue.

They arrived at the theater between acts, and with the full blaze of the auditorium upon them. Bobby's comfort was not at all heightened when Stone almost

immediately followed them in. He had firmly made up his mind as they entered to obtain a place in the rear corner of the box, where he could not be seen; but he was not prepared for the generalship of Mrs. Sharpe, who so manœuvered it as to force him to the very edge, between herself and Garland, and, as she turned to him with a laughing remark which, in pantomime, had all the confidential understanding of most cordial and intimate acquaintanceship, Bobby glanced apprehensively across at the other side of the proscenium-arch. There, in the opposite box, staring at him in shocked amazement, sat Agnes Elliston!

"But Agnes," protested Bobby at the Elliston home next day, "I could not possibly help it."

"No?" she inquired incredulously. "I don't imagine that any one strongly advised you to have anything to do with Mr. Sharpe—and it was through him that you met *her*. Perhaps it is just as well that it happened, however, because it has shown you just how you were about to become involved."

Bobby swallowed quite painfully. His tongue was a little dry.

"Well, the fact of the matter is," he admitted, reddening and stammering, "that I have already 'become involved,' if that's the way you choose to put it; for —for—I signed an agreement with Sharpe, and an

application for increase of capitalization, this morning."

"You don't mean it!" she gasped. "How could you?"

"Why not?" he demanded. "Agnes, it seems quite impossible for you to divorce business and social affairs. I tell you they have absolutely nothing to do with each other. The opportunity Sharpe offered me is a splendid one. Chalmers and Johnson investigated it thoroughly, and both advise me that it is quite an unusually good chance."

"You didn't seem to be able to divorce business and social affairs last night," she reminded him rather sharply, returning to the main point at issue and ignoring all else.

There was the rub. She could not get out of her mind the picture of Mrs. Sharpe chatting gaily with him, smiling up at him and all but fawning upon him, in full view of any number of people who knew both Agnes and Bobby.

"You have made a deliberate choice of your companions, Mr. Burnit, after being warned against them from more than one source," she told him, aflame with indignant jealousy, but speaking with the rigidity common in such quarrels, "and you may abide by your choice."

"Agnes!" he protested. "You don't mean—"

"I mean just this," she interrupted him coldly, "that I certainly can not afford to be seen in public, and don't particularly care to entertain in private, any one who permits himself to be seen in public with, or entertained in private by, the notorious Mrs. Frank L. Sharpe."

They were both of them pale, both trembling, both stiffened by hurt and rebellious pride. Bobby gazed at her a moment in a panic, and saw no relenting in her eyes, in her pose, in her compressed lips. She was still thinking of the way Mrs. Sharpe had looked at him.

"Very well, said he, quite calmly; "since our arrangements for this evening are off, I presume I may as well accept that invitation to dine at Sharpe's," and with this petty threat he left the house.

At the Idlers' he was met by a succession of grins that were more aggravating because for the most part they were but scantily explained. Nick Allstyne, indeed, did take him into a corner, with a vast show of secrecy, requested him to have an ordinance passed, through his new and influential friends, turning Bedlow Park into a polo ground; while Payne Winthrop added insult to injury by shaking hands with him and most gravely congratulating him—but upon what he would not say. Bobby was half grinning and yet half angry when he left the club and went over for

his usual half hour at the gymnasium. Professor Henry H. Bates was also grinning.

"See you're butting in with the swell mob," observed Mr. Bates cheerfully. "Getting your name in the paper, ain't you, along with the fake heavyweights and the divorces?" and before Bobby's eyes he thrust a copy of the yellowest of the morning papers, wherein it was set forth that Mr. and Mrs. Frank L. Sharpe had entertained a notable box party at the Orpheum, the night before, consisting of Samuel Stone, William Garland and Robert Burnit, the latter of whom, it was rumored, was soon to be identified with the larger financial affairs of the city, having already contracted to purchase a controlling interest in the Brightlight Electric Company. The paper had more to say about the significance of Bobby's appearance in this company, as indicating the new political move which sought to ally the younger business element with the progressive party that had been so long in safe, sane and conservative control of municipal affairs, except for the temporary setback of the recent so-called "citizens' movement" hysteria. Bobby frowned more deeply as he read on, and Mr. Bates grinned more and more cheerfully.

"Here's where it happens," he observed. "On the level, Bobby, did they hook you up on this electric deal?"

"What's the matter with it?" demanded Bobby. "After thorough investigation by my own lawyer and my own bookkeeper, the Brightlight proves to have been a profitable enterprise for a great many years, and is in as good condition now as it ever was. Why shouldn't I go into it?"

Biff winked.

"Because it's no fun being the goat," he replied. "Say, tell me, did you ever earn a pull with this bunch?"

"No."

"Well, then, why should they hand you anything but the buzzer? If this is a good stunt don't you suppose they'd keep it at home? Don't you suppose that Stone could go out and get half the money in this town, if he wanted it, to put behind a deal that was worth ten per cent. a year and pickings? I don't care what your lawyer or what Johnson says about it, I know the men. This boy Garland is a good sport, all right, but he's for the easy-money crowd every time—and they're going to make the next mayor out of him. Our local Hicks would rather be robbed by a lot of friendly stick-up artists than have their money wasted by a lot of wooden-heads, and after this election the old Stone gang will have their feet right back in the trough; yes! This is the way I figure the dope. They've framed it up to dump the

Brightlight Electric, and you're the fall guy. So wear pads in your derby, because the first thing you know the hammer's going to drop on your coco."

"How do you find out so much, Biff?" returned Bobby, smiling.

"By sleeping seven hours a day in place of twenty-four. If some of the marks I know would only cough up for a good, reliable alarm clock they'd be better off."

"Meaning me, of course," said Bobby. "For that I'll have to manhandle you a little. Where's your gloves?"

For fifteen minutes they punched away at each other with soft gloves as determinedly and as energetically as if they were deadly enemies, and then Bobby went back up to his own office. He found Applerod jubilant and Johnson glum. Already Applerod heard himself saying to his old neighbors: "As Frank L. Sharpe said to me this morning—," or: "I told Sharpe—," or: "Say! Sam Stone stopped at my desk yesterday—," and already he began to shine by this reflected glory.

"I hear that you have decided to go into the Brightlight Electric," he observed.

"Signed all the papers this morning," admitted Bobby.

"Allow me to congratulate you, sir," said Apple-

rod, but Johnson silently produced from an index case a plain, gray envelope, which he handed to Bobby.

It was inscribed:

To My Son Upon His Putting Good Money Into any Public Service Corporation

and it read:

"When the manipulators of public service corporations tire of skinning the dear public in bulk, they skin individual specimens just to keep in practice. If you have been fool enough to get into the crowd that invokes the aid of dirty politics to help it hang people on street-car straps, just write them out a check for whatever money you have left, and tell your trustee you are broke again; because you are not and never can be of their stripe, and if you are not of their stripe they will pick your bones. Turn a canary loose in a colony of street sparrows and watch what happens to it."

Bobby folded up the letter grimly and went into his private room, where he thought long and soberly. That evening he went out to Sharpe's to dinner. As he was about to ring the bell, he stopped, confronted by a most unusual spectacle. Through the long plate-glass of the door he could see clearly back through the hall into the library, and there stood Mrs. Sharpe and William Garland in a tableau "that would have

given Plato the pip," as Biff Bates might have expressed it had he known about Plato. At that moment Sharpe came silently down the stairs and turned, unobserved, toward the library. Seeing that his wife and Garland were so pleasantly engaged, he very considerately turned into the drawing-room instead, *and as he entered the drawing-room he lit a cigarette!* Bobby, vowing angrily that there could never be room in the Brightlight for both Sharpe and himself, did not ring the bell. Instead, he dropped in at the first public telephone and 'phoned his regrets.

"By the way," he added, "how soon will you need me again?"

"Not before a week, at least," Sharpe replied.

"Very well, then," said Bobby; "I'll be back a week from to-day."

Immediately upon his arrival down-town he telegraphed the joyous news to Jack Starlett, in Washington, to prepare for an old-fashioned loafing bee.

CHAPTER XV

A STRANGE CONNECTION DEVELOPS BETWEEN ELECTRICITY AND POLITICS

CHALMERS, during Bobby's absence, secured all the secret information that he could concerning the Brightlight Electric, but nothing to its detriment transpired in that investigation, and when he returned, Bobby, very sensibly as he thought, completed his investment. He paid his two hundred and fifty thousand dollars into the coffers of the company, and, at the first stock-holders' meeting, voting this stock and the ten shares he had bought from Sharpe at a hundred and seventy-two, he elected his own board of directors, consisting of Chalmers, Johnson, Applerod, Biff Bates and himself, giving one share of stock to each of the other four gentlemen so that they would be eligible. The remaining two members whom he allowed to be elected were Sharpe and J. W. Williams, and the board of directors promptly elected Bobby president and treasurer, Johnson secretary and Chalmers vice-president—a result which gave Bobby great satisfaction. Once he

had been frozen out of a stock company; this time he had absolute control, and he found great pleasure in exercising it, though against Chalmers' protest. With swelling triumph he voted to himself, through his "dummy" directors, the salary of the former president—twelve thousand dollars a year—though he wondered a trifle that President Eastman submitted to his retirement with such equanimity, and after he walked away from that meeting he considered his business career as accomplished. He was settled for life if he wished to remain in the business, the salary added to the dividends on two hundred and sixty thousand dollars worth of stock bringing his own individual income up to a quite respectable figure. If there were no further revenue to be derived from the estate of John Burnit, he felt that he had a very fair prospect in life, indeed, and could, no doubt, make his way very nicely.

He had been unfortunate enough to find Agnes Elliston "not at home" upon the two occasions when he had called since their disagreement upon the subject of the Sharpes, but now he called her up by telephone precisely as if nothing had happened, and explained to her how good his prospects were; good enough, in fact, he added, that he could look matrimony very squarely in the eye.

"Allow me to congratulate you," said Agnes

sweetly. "I presume I'll read presently about the divorce that precedes your marriage," and she hung up the receiver; all of which, had Bobby but paused to reflect upon it, was a very fair indication that all he had to do was to jump in his automobile and call on Aunt Constance Elliston, force his way upon the attention of Agnes and browbeat that young lady into an immediate marriage. He chose, on the contrary, to take the matter more gloomily, and Johnson, after worrying about him for three dismal days, consulted Biff Bates. But Biff, when the problem was propounded to him, only laughed.

"His steady has lemoned him," declared Biff. "Any time a guy's making plenty of money and got good health and ain't married, and goes around with an all-day grouch, you can play it for a one to a hundred favorite that his entry's been scratched in the solitaire diamond stakes."

"Uh-huh," responded the taciturn Johnson, and stalked back with grim purpose to the Electric Company's office, of which Bobby and Johnson and Applerod had taken immediate possession.

The next morning Johnson handed to Bobby one of the familiar gray envelopes, inscribed:

To My Son Upon the Occasion of His Having a Misunderstanding with Agnes Elliston

He submitted the envelope with many qualms and misgivings, though without apology, but one glance at Bobby's face as that young gentleman read the inscription relieved him of all responsibility in the matter, for if ever a face showed guilt, that face was the face of Bobby Burnit. In the privacy of the president's office Bobby read the briefest note of the many that his forethoughted father had left behind him in Johnson's charge:

"You're a blithering idiot!"

That was all. Somehow, that brief note seemed to lighten the gloom, to lift the weight, to remove some sort of a barrier, and he actually laughed. Immediately he called up the Ellistons. He received the information from the housekeeper that Agnes and Aunt Constance had gone to New York on an extended shopping trip, and thereby he lost his greatest and only opportunity to prove that he had at last been successful in business. That day, all the stock which Frank L. Sharpe had held began to come in for transfer, in small lots of from ten to twenty shares, and inside a week not a certificate stood in Sharpe's name. All the stock held by Williams also came in for transfer. Bobby went immediately to see Sharpe, and, very much concerned, inquired into the meaning of

this. Mr. Sharpe was as pleasant as Christmas morning.

"To tell you the truth, Mr. Burnit," said he, "there were several very good reasons. In the first place, I needed the money; in the second place, you were insistent upon control and abused it; in the third place, since the increased capitalization and change of management the quotations on Brightlight Electric dropped from one-seventy-two to one-sixty-five, and I got out before it could drop any lower. You will give me credit for selling the stock privately and in small lots where it could not break the price. However, Mr. Burnit, I don't see where the sale of my stock affects you in any way. You have the Brightlight Electric now in good condition, and all it needs to remain a good investment is proper management."

"I'm afraid it needs more than that," retorted Bobby. "I'm afraid it needs to be in a position to make more money for other people than for myself;" through which remark it may be seen that, though perhaps a trifle slow, Bobby was learning.

Another lesson awaited him. On the following morning every paper in the city blazed with the disquieting information that the Consumers' Electric Light and Power Company and the United Illuminating and Fuel Company were to be consolidated! Out of the two old concerns a fifty-million-dollar cor-

poration was to be formed, and a certain portion of the stock was to be sold in small lots, as low, even, as one share each, so that the public should be given a chance to participate in this unparalleled investment. Oh, it was to be a tremendous boon to the city!

Bobby, much worried, went straight to Chalmers.

"So far as I can see you have all the best of the bargain," Chalmers reassured him. "The Consumers', already four times watered and quoted at about seventy, is to be increased from two to five million before the consolidation, so that it can be taken in at ten million. The Union, already watered from one to nine million in its few brief years, takes on another hydraulic spurt and will be bought for twenty million. Of the thirty million dollars which is to be paid for the old corporation, nineteen million represents new water, the most of which will be distributed among Stone and his henchmen. The other twenty million will go to the dear public, who will probably be given one share of common as a bonus with each share of preferred, and pay ten million sweaty dollars for it. Do you think this new company expects to pay dividends? On their plants, worth at a high valuation, five million dollars, and their new capital of ten million, a profit must be earned for fifty million dollars' worth of stock, and it can not be done. Within a year I expect to see Consolidated Illuminat-

ing and Power Company stock quoted at around thirty. By that time, however, Stone and his crowd will have sold theirs, and will have cleaned up millions. Brightlight Electric was probably too small a factor to be considered in the consolidation. Did you pay off that mortgage? Then Stone has his hundred thousand dollars; the back salary list of Stone's henchmen has been paid up with your money; Sharpe and Williams have converted their stock and Stone's into cash at a fancy figure; Eastman is to be taken care of in the new company and they are satisfied. In my estimation you are well rid of the entire crowd, unless they have some neat little plan for squeezing you. But I'll tell you what I would do. I would go direct to Stone, and see what he has to say."

Bobby smiled ironically at himself as he climbed the dingy stairs up which it was said that every man of affairs in the city must sooner or later toil to bend the knee, but he was astonished when he walked into the office of Stone to find it a narrow, bare little room, with the door wide open to the hall. There was an old, empty desk in it—for Stone never kept nor wrote letters—and four common kitchen chairs for waiting callers. At the desk near the one window sat Stone, and over him bent a shabby-looking man, whispering. Stone, grunting occasionally, looked out of the win-

dow while he listened, and when the man was through gave him a ten-dollar bill.

"It's all right," Stone said gruffly. "I'll be in court myself at ten o'clock to-morrow morning, and you may tell Billy that I'll get him out of it."

Another man, a flashily-dressed fellow, was ahead of Bobby, and he, too, now leaned over Stone and whispered.

"Nothing doing," rumbled Stone.

The man, from his gestures, protested earnestly.

"Nix!" declared Stone loudly. "You threw me two years ago this fall, and you can't come back till you're on your uppers good and proper. I don't want to see you nor hear of you for another year, and you needn't send any one to me to fix it, because it can't be fixed. Now beat it. I'm busy!"

The man, much crestfallen, "beat it." Bobby was thankful that there was no one else waiting when it was his turn to approach the Mogul. Stone shook hands cordially enough.

"Mr. Stone," inquired Bobby, "how does it come that the Brightlight Electric Company was not offered a chance to come into this new consolidation?"

"How should I know?" asked Stone in reply.

"It is popularly supposed," suggested Bobby, smiling, "that you know a great deal about it."

Mr. Stone ignored that supposition completely.

"Mr. Burnit, how much political influence do you think you could swing?"

"Frankly, I never thought of it," said Bobby surprised.

"You belong to the Idlers' Club, you belong to the Traders' Club, to the Fish and Game, the Brassie, the Gourmet, and the Thespian Clubs. You are a member of the board of governors in three of these clubs, and are very popular in all of them. A man like you, if he would get wise, could swing a strong following."

"Possibly," admitted Bobby dryly; "although I wouldn't enjoy it."

"One-third of the members of the Traders' Club do not vote, more than half of the members of the Fish and Game and the Brassie do not vote, none of the members of the other clubs vote at all," went on Mr. Stone. "They ain't good citizens. If you're the man that can stir them up the right way you'd find it worth while."

"But just now," evaded Bobby, "whom did you say I should see about this consolidation?"

"Sharpe," snapped Stone. "Good day, Mr. Burnit." And Bobby walked away rather belittled in his own estimation.

He had been offered an excellent chance to become one of Stone's political lieutenants, had been given

an opportunity to step up to the pie counter, to enjoy the very material benefits of the Stone style of municipal government; and in exchange for this he had only to sell his fellows. He knew now that his visit to Sharpe would be fruitless, that before he could arrive at Sharpe's office that puppet would have had a telephone message from Stone; yet, his curiosity aroused, he saw the thing through. Mr. Sharpe, upon his visit, met Bobby as coldly as the January morning when the Christmas bills come in.

"We don't really care for the Brightlight Electric in the combination at all," said Mr. Sharpe, "but if you wish to come in at a valuation of five hundred thousand I guess we can find a place for you."

"Let me understand," said Bobby. "By a valuation of five hundred thousand dollars you mean that the Brightlight stock-holders can exchange each share of their stock for one share in the Consolidated?"

"That's it, precisely," said Mr. Sharpe without a smile.

"You're joking," objected Bobby. "My stock in the Brightlight is worth to-day one hundred and fifty dollars a share. My two hundred and sixty thousand dollars' worth of stock in the Consolidated would not be worth par, even, to-day. Why do you make this discrimination when you are giving the stock-holders of the Consumers' an exchange of five shares for one,

and the stock-holders of the United an exchange of twenty shares for nine?"

"We need both those companies," calmly explained Sharpe, "and we don't need the Brightlight."

"Is that figure the best you will do?"

"Under the circumstances, yes."

"Very well then," said Bobby; "good day."

"By the way, Mr. Burnit," Sharpe said to him with a return of the charming smile which had been conspicuously absent on this occasion, "we needn't consider the talk entirely closed as yet. It might be possible that we would be able, between now and the first of the next month, when the consolidation is to be completed, to make you a much more liberal offer to come in with us; to be one of us, in fact."

Bobby sat down again.

"How soon may I see you about it?" he asked.

"I'll let you know when things are shaped up right. By the way, Mr. Burnit, you are a very young man yet, and just starting upon your career. Really you ought to look about you a bit and study what advantages you have in the way of personal influence and following."

"I have never counted that I had a 'following.'"

"I understand that you have a very strong one," insisted Sharpe. "What you ought to do is to see Mr. Stone."

"I have been to see him," replied Bobby with a smile.

"So I understand," said Sharpe dryly. "By the way, next Tuesday I am to be voted upon in the Idlers'. You are on the board of governors up there, I believe?"

"Yes," said Bobby steadily.

Sharpe studied him for a moment.

"Well, come around and see me about this consolidation on Wednesday," he suggested, "and in the meantime have another talk with Stone. By all means, go and see Stone."

"Johnson," asked Bobby, later, "what would you do if a man should ask you to sell him your personal influence, your self-respect and your immortal soul?"

"I'd ask his price," interposed Applerod with a grin.

"You'd never get an offer," snapped Johnson to Applerod, "for you haven't any to sell. Why do you ask, Mr. Burnit?"

Bobby regarded Johnson thoughtfully for a moment.

"I know how to make the Brightlight Electric Company yield me two hundred per cent. dividends within a year or less," he stated.

"Through Stone?" inquired Johnson.

"Through Stone," admitted Bobby, smiling at Johnson's penetration.

"I thought so. I guess your father has summed up, better than I could put it, all there is to be said upon that subject." And from his index-file he produced one of the familiar gray envelopes, inscribed:

To My Son Robert Upon the Subject of Bribery

"When a man sells his independence and the faith of his friends he is bankrupt. Both the taker and the giver of a bribe, even when it is called 'preferment,' are like dogs with fleas; they yelp in their sleep; only the man gets callous after a while and the dog doesn't. Whoever the fellow is that's trying to buy your self-respect, go soak him in the eye, and pay your fine."

"For once I agree most heartily with the governor," said Bobby, and as a result he did not go to see Stone. Moreover, Frank L. Sharpe was blackballed at the Idlers' Club with cheerful unanimity, and Bobby figuratively squared his shoulders to receive the blow that he was convinced must certainly fall.

CHAPTER XVI

AGNES APPEARS PUBLICLY WITH MRS. SHARPE AND BIFF BATES HAS A ONE-ROUND SCRAP

THAT night, though rather preoccupied by the grave consequences that might ensue on this flat-footed defiance of Stone and his crowd, Bobby went to the theater with Jack Starlett and Jack's sister and mother. As they seated themselves he bowed gravely across the auditorium to Agnes and Aunt Constance Elliston, who, with Uncle Dan, were entertaining a young woman relative from Savannah. He did not know how the others accepted his greeting; he only saw Agnes, and she smiled quite placidly at him, which was far worse than if she had tilted her head. Through two dreary, interminable acts he sat looking at the stage, trying to talk small talk with the Starletts and remaining absolutely miserable; but shortly before the beginning of the last act he was able to take a quite new and gleeful interest in life, for the young woman from Savannah came fluttering into the Elliston box, bearing in tow the beautiful and vivacious Mrs. Frank L. Sharpe!

Bobby turned his opera-glasses at once upon that box, and pressed Jack Starlett into service. Being thus attracted, the ladies of the Starlett box, mystified and unable to extract any explanation from the two gleeful men, were compelled, by force of circumstances and curiosity, also to opera-glass and lorgnette the sufferers.

Like the general into which he was developing, Bobby managed to meet Agnes face to face in the foyer after the show. Tears of mortification were in her eyes, but still she was laughing when he strode up to her and with masterful authority drew her arm beneath his own.

"Your carriage is too small for four," Bobby calmly told Mr. Elliston, and, excusing himself from the Starletts, deliberately conducted Agnes to a hansom. As they got well under way he observed:

"You will notice that I make no question of being seen in public with—"

"Bobby!" she protested. "Violet did not know. The Sharpes visited in Savannah. His connections down there are quite respectable, and no doubt Mrs. Sharpe, who is really clever, held herself very circumspectly."

"Fine!" said Bobby. "You will notice that I am quite willing to listen to *you*. Explain some more."

"Bobby!" she protested again, and then suddenly

she bent forward and pressed her handkerchief to her eyes.

Bobby was astounded. She was actually crying! In a moment he had her in his arms, was pressing her head upon his shoulder, was saying soothing things to her with perfectly idiotic volubility. For an infinitesimally brief space Agnes yielded to that embrace, and then suddenly she straightened up in dismay.

"Good gracious, Bobby!" she exclaimed. "This hansom is all glass!"

He looked out upon the brilliantly lighted street with a reflex of her own consternation, but quickly found consolation.

"Well, after all," he reflected philosophically, "I don't believe anybody who saw me would blame me."

"You're a perfectly incorrigible Bobby," she laughed. "The only check possible to put upon you is to hold you rigidly to business. How are you coming out with the Brightlight Electric Company? I have been dying to ask you about it."

"I have a telephone in my office," he reminded her.

"I am completely ignoring that ungenerous suggestion," she replied.

"It wasn't sportsmanlike," he penitently admitted. "Well, the Brightlight Electric is still making money, and Johnson has stopped leaks to the amount of at

least twenty thousand dollars a year, which will permit us to keep up the ten per cent. dividends, even with our increased capitalization, and even without an increase of business."

"Glorious!" she said with sparkling eyes.

"Too good to be true," he assured her. "They'll take it away from me."

"How is it possible?" she asked.

"It isn't; but it will happen, nevertheless," he declared with conviction.

He had already begun to spend his days and nights in apprehension of this, and as the weeks went on and nothing happened his apprehension grew rather than diminished.

In the meantime, the Consolidated Illuminating and Power Company went pompously on. The great combine was formed, the fifty million dollars' worth of stock was opened for subscription, and the company gave a vastly expensive banquet in the convention hall of the Hotel Spender, at which a thousand of the city's foremost men were entertained, and where the cleverest after-dinner speakers to be obtained talked in relays until long after midnight. Those who came to eat the rich food and drink the rare wine and lend their countenances to the stupendous local enterprise, being shrewd business graduates who had cut their eye-teeth in their cradles, smiled and went home with-

out any thought of investing; but the hard-working, economical chaps of the offices and shops, men who felt elated if, after five years of slavery, they could show ten hundred dollars of savings, glanced in awe over this magnificent list of names in the next day's papers. If the stock of the Consolidated Illuminating and Power Company was considered a good investment by these generals and captains and lieutenants of finance, who, of course, attended this Arabian Nights banquet as investors, it must certainly be a good investment for the corporals and privates.

Immediately vivid results were shown. Immense electric signs, furnished at less than cost and some of them as big as the buildings upon the roofs of which they were erected, began to make constellations in the city sky; buildings in the principal down-town squares were studded, for little or nothing, with outside incandescent lights as thickly as wall space could be found for them, and the men whose only automobiles are street-cars awoke to the fact that their city was becoming intensely metropolitan; that it was blazing with the blaze of Paris and London and New York; that all this glittering advancement was due to the great new Consolidated Illuminating and Power Company, and more applications for stock were made!

Every applicant was supplied, but the treasury stock of the company having been sold out, the scrip

had to come from some place else, and it came through devious, secret ways from the holdings of such men as Stone and Garland and Sharpe.

During the grand orgie of illumination the election came on; the price of gas and electricity went gloriously and recklessly down, and the men who were identified with the triumphantly successful new illuminating company were the leading figures in the campaign. The puerile "reform party," the blunders of whose incompetence had been ridiculous, was swept out of existence; Garland was elected mayor by the most overwhelming majority that had ever been known in the city, and with him was elected a council of the same political faith. Sam Stone, always in the background, always keeping his name out of the papers as much as possible, came once more to the throne, and owned the city and all its inhabitants and all its business enterprises and all its public utilities, body and soul.

One night, shortly after the new officials went into power, there was no light in the twelve blocks over which the Brightlight Company had exclusive control, nor any light in the outside districts it supplied. This was the first time in years that the company, equipped with an emergency battery of dynamos which now proved out of order, had ever failed for an instant of proper service. Candles, kerosene lamps

and old gas fixtures, the rusty cocks of which had not been turned in a decade, were put hastily in use, while the streets were black with a blackness particularly Stygian, contrasted with the brilliantly illuminated squares supplied by the Consolidated Company. All night long the mechanical force, attended by the worried but painfully helpless Bobby, pounded and tapped and worked in the grime, but it was not until broad daylight that they were able to discover the cause of trouble. For two nights the lights ran steadily. On the third night, at about seven-thirty, they turned to a dull, red glow, and slowly died out. This time it was wire trouble, and through the long night as large a force of men as could be mustered were tracing it. Not until noon of the next day was the leak found.

It was a full week before that section of the city was for the third time in darkness, but when this occurred the business men of the district, who had been patient enough the first night and enduring enough the second, loosed their reins and became frantic.

At this happy juncture the Consolidated Company threw an army of canvassers into those twelve monopolized blocks, and the canvassers did not need to be men who could talk, for arguments were not necessary. The old, worn-out equipment of the Bright-

light Electric, and the fact that it was managed and controlled by men who knew nothing whatever of the business, its very president a young fellow who had probably never seen a dynamo until he took charge, were enough.

Bobby, passing over Plum Street one morning, was surprised to see a large gang of men putting in new poles, and when he reached the office he asked Johnson about it. In two minutes he had definitely ascertained that no orders had been issued by the Bright-light Electric Company nor any one connected with it, and further inquiry revealed the fact that these poles were being put up by the Consolidated. He called up Chalmers at once.

"I knew I'd hear from you," said Chalmers, "and I have already been at work on the thing. Of course, you saw what was in the papers."

"No," confessed Bobby. "Only the sporting pages."

"You should read news, local and general, every morning," scolded Chalmers. "The new city council, at their meeting last night, granted the Consolidated a franchise to put up poles and wires in this district for lighting."

"But how could they?" expostulated Bobby. "Our contract with the city has several years to run yet, and guarantees us exclusive privilege to supply light,

both to the city and to private individuals, in those twelve blocks."

"That cleverly unobtrusive joker clause about 'reasonably satisfactory service,'" replied Chalmers angrily. "By the way, have you investigated the cause of those accidents very thoroughly? Whether there was anything malicious about them?"

Bobby confessed that he had not thought of the possibility.

"I think it would pay you to do so. I am delving into this thing as deeply as I can, and with your permission I am going to call your father's old attorney, Mr. Barrister, into consultation."

"Go ahead, by all means," said Bobby, worried beyond measure.

At five o'clock that evening Con Ripley came jauntily to the plant of the Brightlight Electric Company. Con was the engineer, and the world was a very good joke to him, although not such a joke that he ever overlooked his own interests. He spruced up considerably outside of working hours, did Con, and, although he was nearing forty, considered himself very much a ladies' man, also an accomplished athlete, and positively the last word in electrical knowledge. He was donning his working garments in very leisurely fashion when a short, broad-shouldered, thickset young man came back toward him from the office.

"You're Con Ripley?" said the new-comer by way of introduction.

"Maybe," agreed Con. "Who are you?"

"I'm the Assistant Works," observed Professor Henry H. Bates.

"Oh!" said Mr. Ripley in some wonder, looking from the soft cap of Mr. Bates to the broad, thick tan shoes of Mr. Bates, and then back up to the wide-set eyes. "I hadn't heard about it."

"No?" responded Mr. Bates. "Well, I came in to tell you. I don't know enough about electricity to say whether you feed it with a spoon or from a bottle, but I'm here, just the same, to notice that the juice slips through the wires all right to-night, all right."

"The hell you are!" exclaimed Mr. Ripley, taking sudden umbrage at both tone and words, and also at the physical attitude of Mr. Bates, which had grown somewhat threatening. "All right, Mr. Works," and Mr. Ripley began to step out of his overalls; "jump right in and push juice till you get black in the face, while I take a little vacation. I've been wanting a lay-off for a long time."

"You'll lay on, Bo," dissented Mr. Bates. "Nix on the vacation. That's just the point. You're going to stick on the job, and I'm going to stick within four feet of you till old Jim-jams Jones shakes along to get his morning's morning; and it will be a sign

of awful bad luck for you if the lights in this end of town flicker a single flick any time to-night."

"Is that it?" Mr. Ripley wanted to know. "And if they should happen to flicker some what are you going to do about it?"

"I don't know yet," said Biff. "I'll knock your block off first and think about it afterward!"

Mr. Ripley hastily drew his overalls back on and slipped the straps over his shoulders with a snap.

"You'll tell me when you're going to do it, won't you?" he asked banteringly, and, a full head taller than Mr. Bates, glared down at him a moment in contempt. Then he laughed. "I'll give you ten to one the lights will flicker," he offered to bet. "I wouldn't stop such a cunning chance for exercise for real money," and, whirling upon his heel, Mr. Ripley started upon his usual preliminary examination of dynamos and engines and boilers.

Quite nonchalantly Mr. Bates, puffing at a particularly villainous stogie and with his hands resting idly in his pockets, swung after Mr. Ripley, keeping within almost precisely four feet of him. In the boiler-room, Ripley, finding Biff still at his heels, said to the fireman, with a jerk of his thumb over his shoulder:

"Rocksey, be sure you keep a good head of steam on to-night if you're a friend of mine. This is Mr.

Assistant Works back here, and he's come in to knock my block off if the lights flicker."

"Rocksey," a lean man with gray beard-bristles like pins and with muscles in astounding lumps upon his grimy arms, surveyed Mr. Bates with a grin which meant volumes.

"Ring a bell when it starts, will you, Con?" he requested.

To this Biff paid not the slightest attention, gazing stolidly at the red fire where it shone through the holes of the furnace doors; but when Mr. Ripley moved away Biff moved also. Ripley introduced Biff in much the same terms to a tall man who was oiling the big, old-fashioned Corliss, and a sudden gleam came into the tall man's eyes as he recognized Mr. Bates, but he turned back to his oiling without smile or comment. Ripley eyed him sharply.

"You'll hold the sponge and water-bottle for me, won't you, Daly?" he asked, with an evident attempt at jovial conciliation.

Daly deliberately wiped the slender nose of his oil can and went on oiling.

"What's the matter?" asked Ripley with a frown. "Got a grouch again?"

"Yes, I have," admitted Daly without looking up, and shrugged his shoulders.

"Then cut it out," said Ripley, "and look real un-

peeved when somebody hands you tickets to the circus."

From that moment Mr. Ripley seemed to take a keen delight in goading Mr. Bates. He took a sudden dash half-way down the length of the long room, as if going to the extreme other end of the plant, then suddenly whirled and retraced his steps to meet Biff coming after him; made an equally sudden dart for the mysterious switch-board, and seized a lever as if to throw it, but suddenly changed his mind, apparently, and went away, leaving Mr. Bates to infer that the throwing of that particular lever would leave them all in darkness; later, with Biff ready to spring upon him, he threw that switch to show that it had no important function to perform at all. To all these and many more ingenious tricks to humiliate him, Mr. Bates paid not the slightest attention, but, as calmly and as impassively as Fate, kept as nearly as he could to the four-foot distance he had promised.

It was about ten o'clock when Biff, interested for a moment in the switch-board, suddenly missed Ripley, and looking about him hastily he saw the fireman standing in the door of the boiler-room grinning at him, while the other workmen—all of whom were of the old régime—were also enjoying his discomfort; but Daly, catching his eye, nodded significantly toward the side-door which led upon the street. It was

an almost imperceptible nod, but it was enough for Biff, and he dashed out of that door. Half a block ahead of him he saw Ripley hurrying, and took after him with that light, cat-like run which is the height of effortless and noiseless speed. Ripley, looking back hastily, hurried into a saloon, and he had scarcely closed the door when Biff entered after him, in time to see his man standing at the telephone, receiver in hand. It was the work of but an instant to grab Ripley by the arm and jerk him away from the 'phone. Quickly recovering his balance, with a lunge of his whole body Ripley shot a swift fist at the man who had interfered with him, but Biff, without shifting his position, jerked his head to one side and the fist shot harmlessly by. Before another blow could be struck, or parried, the bartender, a brawny giant, had rushed between them.

"Let us alone, Jeff," panted Ripley. "I've got all I can stand for from this rat."

"Outside!" said Jeff with cold finality. "You can beat him to a pulp in the street, Con, but there'll be no scrimmage in this place without me having a hand in it."

Ripley considered this ultimatum for a moment in silence, and then, to Biff's surprise, suddenly ran out of the door. It was a tight race to the plant, and there, with Biff not more than two arms' length

behind him, Ripley jerked at a lever hitherto untouched, and instantly the place was plunged into complete darkness.

"There!" screamed Ripley.

A second later Biff had grappled him, and together they went to the floor. It was only a moment that the darkness lasted, however, for tall Tom Daly stood by the replaced switch, looking down at them in quiet joy. Immediately with the turning on of the light Biff scrambled to his feet like a cat and waited for Ripley to rise. It was Ripley who made the first lunge, which Biff dexterously ducked, and immediately after Biff's right arm shot out, catching his antagonist a glancing blow upon the side of the cheek; a blow which drew blood. Infuriated, again Ripley rushed, but was blocked, and for nearly a minute there was a swift exchange of light blows which did little damage; then Biff found his opening, and, swinging about the axis of his own spine, threw the entire force of his body behind his right arm, and the fist of that arm caught Ripley below the ear and dropped him like a beef, just as Bobby came running back from the office.

"What are you doing here, Biff? What's the matter?" demanded Bobby, as Ripley, dazed, struggled to his feet, and, though weaving, drew himself together for another onslaught.

"Matter!" snarled Biff. "I landed on a frame-up, that's all. This afternoon I saw Sharpe and this Ripley together in a bum wine-room on River Street, swapping so much of that earnest conversation that the partitions bulged, and I dropped to the double-cross that's being handed out to you. I've been trying to telephone you ever since, but when I couldn't find you I came right down to run the plant. That's all."

"You're all right, Biff," laughed Bobby, "but I guess we'll call this a one-round affair, and I'll take charge."

"Don't stop 'em!" cried Daly savagely, turning to Bobby. "Hand it to him, Biff. He's a crook and an all-round sneak. He beat me out of this job by underhand means, and there ain't a man in the place that ain't tickled to death to see him get the beating that's coming to him. Paste him, Biff!"

"Biff!" repeated Mr. Ripley, suddenly dropping his hands. "Biff who?"

"Mr. Biff Bates, the well-known and justly celebrated ex-champion middleweight," announced Bobby with a grin. "Mr. Ripley—Mr. Bates."

"Biff Bates!" repeated Con Ripley. "Why didn't some of you guys tell me this was Biff Bates? Mr. Bates, I'm glad to meet you." And with much respect he held forth his hand.

"Go chase yourself," growled Mr. Bates, in infinite scorn.

Ripley replied with a sudden volley of abuse, couched in the vilest of language, but to this Biff made no reply. He dropped his hands in his coat pockets, and, considering his work done, walked over to the wall and leaned against it, awaiting further developments.

"Daly," asked Bobby sharply, breaking in upon Ripley's tirade, "are you competent to run this plant?"

"Certainly, sir," replied Daly. "I should have had the job four years ago. I was promised it."

"You may consider yourself in charge, then. Mr. Ripley, if you will walk up to the office I'll pay you off."

CHAPTER XVII

BOBBY'S MONEY IS ELECTROCUTED AND JOHN BURNIT'S SON WAKES UP

BOBBY, jubilant, went to see Chalmers next day. The lawyer listened gravely, but shook his head.

"I'm bound to tell you, Mr. Burnit, that you have no case. You must have more proof than this to bring a charge of conspiracy. Ripley had a perfect right to talk with Sharpe or to telephone to some one, and mere hot-headedness could explain his shutting off the lights. Your over-enthusiastic friend Bates has ruined whatever prospect you might have had. Your suspicions once aroused, you should have let your man do as he liked, but should have watched him and caught him in a trap of some sort. Now it is too late. Moreover, I have bad news for you. Your contract for city lighting is ironclad, and can not be broken, but I saw to-day a paper signed by an overwhelming majority of your private consumers that the service is not even 'reasonably satisfactory,' and that they wish the field open to competition.

With this paper to back them, Stone's council granted the right to the Consolidated Company to erect poles, string wires and supply current. We can bring suit if you say so, but you will lose it."

"Bring suit, then!" ordered Bobby vehemently. "Why, Chalmers, the contract for the city lighting alone would cost the Brightlight money every year. The profit has all been made from private consumers."

"That's why you're losing it," said Chalmers dryly. "The whole project is very plain to me now. The Consumers and the United Companies never cared to enter that field, because their controlling stock-holders were also the Brightlight controlling stock-holders, and they could get more money through the Brightlight than they could through the other companies; and so they led the public to believe that there was no breaking the monopoly the Brightlight held upon their service. Now, however, they want to gain another stock-jobbing advertisement by driving you out of the field. They planned from the first to wreck you for just that purpose—to make Consolidated stock seem more desirable when the stock sales began to dwindle—and they are perfectly willing to furnish the consumers in your twelve blocks with current at their present ridiculously low rate, because, with them, any possible profits to be derived from the

business are insignificant compared to the profits to be derived from the sale of their watered stock. The price of illumination and power, later, will *soar!* Watch it. They're a very bright crowd," and Mr. Chalmers paused to admire them.

"In other words," said Bobby glumly. "I am what Biff Bates told me I would be—the goat."

"Precisely," agreed Chalmers.

"Begin suit anyhow," directed Bobby, "and we'll see what comes of it."

"By the way," called Chalmers with a curious smile as Bobby opened the door; "I've just learned that one of the foremost enthusiasts in this whole manipulation has been quiet and conservative Silas Trimmer."

Bobby did not swear. He simply slammed the door.

Two days later Bobby was surprised to see Sharpe drop in upon him.

"I understand you are bringing suit against the Consolidated for encroachment upon your territory, and against the city for abrogation of contract," began Sharpe.

"Yes," said Bobby.

"Don't you think it rather a waste of money, Mr. Burnit? I can guarantee you positively that you will not win either suit."

"I'm willing to wait to find that out."

"No use," said Sharpe impatiently. "I'll tell you what we will do, Mr. Burnit. If you care to have us to do so, the Consolidated, a little later on, will absorb the Brightlight."

"On what terms?" asked Bobby.

"It all depends. We might discuss that later. There's another matter I'd like to speak with you about. Stone wants to see you, even yet. I want to tell you, Mr. Burnit, he can get along a great deal better without you than you can without him, as you are probably willing to admit by now. But he still wants you. Go and see Stone."

"On—what—terms—will the Consolidated now absorb the Brightlight?" demanded Bobby sternly.

"Well," drawled Sharpe, with a complete change of manner, "the property has deteriorated considerably within a remarkably short space of time, but I should say that we would buy the Brightlight for three hundred thousand dollars in stock of the Consolidated, half preferred and half common."

"And this is your very best offer?"

"The very best," replied Sharpe, making no attempt to conceal his exultant grin.

"Not on your life," declared Bobby. "I'm going to hold the Brightlight intact. I'm going to fulfill the city contract at a loss, if it takes every cent I can

scrape together, and then I'm going to enter politics myself. I'm going to drive Stone and his crowd out of this city, and we shall see if we can not make a readjustment of the illuminating business on my basis instead of his. Good day, Mr. Sharpe."

"Good day, sir," said Sharpe, and this time he laughed aloud.

At the door he turned.

"I'd like to call your attention, young man, to the fact that a great many very determined gentlemen have announced their intention of driving Mr. Stone and his associates out of this city. You might compare that with the fact that Mr. Stone and his friends are all here yet, and on top," and with that he withdrew.

"If I may be so bold as to say so," said Mr. Applerod, worried to paleness by this foolish defiance of so great and good a man, "you have made a very grave error, Mr. Burnit, very grave, indeed. It is suicidal to defy Mr. Sharpe, and through him *Mr. Stone!*"

"Will you shut up!" snarled Johnson to his ancient work-mate. "Mr. Burnit, I have no right to take the liberty, but I am going to congratulate you, sir. Whatever follies inexperience may have led you to commit, you are, at any rate, sir, a *man*, like your father was before you!" and by way of emphasis

Johnson smacked his fist on his desk as he glared in Mr. Applerod's direction.

"It's all very well to show fight, Johnson," said Bobby, a little wanly, "but just the same I have to acknowledge defeat. I am afraid I boasted too much. Chalmers, after considering the matter, positively refuses to bring suit. The whole game is over. I have the Brightlight Company on my hands at a net dead loss of every cent I have sunk into it, and it can not pay me a penny so long as these men remain in power. I am going to fight them with their own weapons, but that is a matter of years. In the meantime, my third business attempt is a hideous failure. Where's the gray envelope, Johnson?"

"It is here," admitted Johnson, and from his file took the missive in question.

As Bobby took the letter from Johnson Agnes came into the office and swept toward him with outstretched hand.

"It is perfectly shameful, Bobby! I just read about it!"

"So soon?" he wanted to know.

She carried a paper in her hand and spread it before him. In the very head-line his fate was pronounced. "Brightlight Electric Tottering to Its Fall," was the cheerful line which confronted him, and beneath this was set forth the facts that every

profitable contract heretofore held by the Brightlight Electric had been taken away from that unfortunate concern, in which the equipment was said to be so inefficient as to render decent service out of the question, and that, having remaining to it only a money-losing contract for city lighting, business men were freely predicting its very sudden dissolution. The item, wherein the head-line took up more space than the news, wound up with the climax statement that Brightlight stock was being freely offered at around forty, with no takers.

To her surprise, Bobby tossed the paper on Johnson's desk and laughed.

"I have been so long prepared for this bit of 'news' that it does not shock me much," he said; "moreover, the lower this stock goes the cheaper I can buy it!"

"Buy it!" she incredulously exclaimed.

"Exactly," he stated calmly. "I presume that, as heretofore, I'll be given another check, and I do not see any better place to put the money than right here. I am going to fight!"

"Beg your pardon, sir," said Johnson. "Your last remark was spoken loud enough to be taken as general, and I am compelled to give you this envelope."

Into his hands Johnson placed a mate to the mis-

sive which Bobby had not yet opened, and this one was inscribed:

To My Son Robert, Upon His Declaration that He Will Take Two Starts at the Same Business

Bobby looked at the two letters in frowning perplexity, and then silently walked into his own office, where Agnes followed him; and it was she who closed the door. He sat down at his desk and held that last letter of his father's before him in dread. He had so airily built up his program; and apprehension told him what this letter might contain! Presently he was conscious that Agnes' arm was slipped across his shoulder. She was sitting upon the arm of his chair, and had bent her cheek upon his head. So they read the curt message:

"To throw good money after bad is like sprinkling salt on a cut. It only intensifies the pain and doesn't work much of a cure. In your case it is strictly forbidden. You must learn to cut your garment according to your cloth, to bite off only what you can chew, to lift no more than you can carry. Your next start must not be encumbered."

"He's wrong!" declared Bobby savagely.

"But if he is," protested Agnes, "what can you do about it?"

"If his bequests are conditional I shall have to accept the conditions; but, nevertheless, I am going to fight; and I am going to keep the Brightlight Electric!"

Mechanically he opened the other letter now. The contents were to this effect:

To My Son Upon His Losing Money in a Public Service Corporation

"Every buzz-saw claims some fingers. Of course you had to be a victim, but now you know how to handle a buzz-saw. The first point about it is to treat it with respect. When you realize thoroughly that a buzz-saw is dangerous, half the danger is gone. So, when your wound is healed, you might go ahead and saw, just as a matter of accomplishment. Bobby, how I wish I could talk with you now, for just one little half hour."

Convulsively Bobby crumpled the letter in his hand and the tears started to his eyes.

"Bully old dad!" he said brokenly, and opened his watch-case, where the grim but humor-loving face of old John Burnit looked up at his beloved children.

"And now what are you going to do?" Agnes asked him presently, when they were calmer.

"Fight!" he vehemently declared. "For the governor's sake as well as my own."

"I just found another letter for you, sir," said Johnson, handing in the third of the missives to come in that day's mail from beyond the Styx. It was inscribed:

To My Son Robert Upon the Occasion of His Declaring Fight Against the Politicians Who Robbed Him

"Nothing but public laziness allows dishonest men to control public affairs. Any time an honest man puts up a sincere fight against a crook there's a new fat man in striped clothes. If you have a crawful and want to fight against dirty politics in earnest, jump in, and tell all my old friends to put a bet down on you for me. I'd as soon have you spend in that way the money I made as to buy yachts with it; and I can see where the game might be made as interesting as polo. Go in and win, boy."

"And now what are you going to do?" Agnes asked him, laughing this time.

"Fight!" he declared exultantly. "I'm going to fight entirely outside of my father's money. I'm going to fight with my own brawn and my own brain and my own resources and my own personal following! Why, Agnes, that is what the governor has been goading me to do. It is what all this is planned for, and the governor, after all, is right!"

CHAPTER XVIII

SOME EMINENT ARTISTS AMUSE MEESTER BURNIT WHILE HE WAITS

ONE might imagine, after Bobby's heroic declarations, that, like young David of old, he would immediately proceed to stride forth and slay his giant. There stood his Goliath, full panoplied, sneering, waiting; but alas! Bobby had neither sling nor stone. It was all very well to announce in fine frenzy that he would smash the Consolidated, destroy the political ring, drive Sam Stone and his henchmen out of town and wrest all his goods and gear from Silas Trimmer; but until he could find a place to plant his foot, descry an opening in the armor and procure an adequate weapon, he might just as well bottle his fuming and wait; so Bobby waited. In the meantime he stuck very closely to the Brightlight office, finding there, in the practice of petty economics and the struggle with well-nigh impossible conditions, ample food for thought. In a separate bank reposed the new fund of two hundred and fifty thousand dollars, which he

kept religiously aside from the affairs of the Brightlight, and this fund also waited; for Bobby was not nearly so feverish to find instant employment for it as he had been with the previous ones—though he had endless chances. People with the most unheard of schemes seemed to have a peculiar scent for unsophisticated money, and not only local experts in the gentle art of separation flocked after him, but out of town specialists came to him in shoals. To these latter he took great satisfaction in displaying the gem of his collection of post-mortem letters from old John Burnit:

"You don't need to go away from home to be skinned; moreover, it isn't patriotic."

That usually stopped them. He was growing quite sophisticated, was Bobby, quite able to discern the claws beneath the velvet paw, quite suspicious of all the ingenious gentlemen who wanted to make a fortune for him; and their frantic attempts to "get his goat," as Biff Bates expressed it, had become as good as a play to this wise young person, as also to the wise young person's trustee.

Agnes, who was helping Bobby wait, came occasionally to the office of the Brightlight on business, and nearly always Bobby had reduced to paper some gaudy new scheme that had been proposed to him,

Little me to trot out and find an angel. Are you it?

over which they both might laugh. In great hilarity one morning they were going over the prospectus of a plan to reclaim certain swamp lands in Florida, when the telephone bell rang, and from Bobby's difficulty in understanding and his smile as he hung up the receiver, Agnes knew that something else amusing had turned up.

"It is from Schmirdonner," he explained as he turned to her again. "He's the conductor of the orchestra at the Orpheum, you know. I gather from what he says that there are some stranded musicians here who probably speak worse English than myself, and he's sending them up to me to see about arranging a benefit for them. You'd better wait; it might be fun, or you might want to help arrange the benefit."

"No," disclaimed Agnes, laughing and drawing her impedimenta together for departure, "I'll leave both the fun and the philanthropy to you. I know you're quite able to take care of them. I'll just wait long enough to hear how we're to get rid of the water down in Florida. I suppose we bore holes in the ground and let it run out."

"By no means," laughed Bobby. "It's no where near so absurdly simple as that," and he turned once more to the prospectus which lay open on the desk before them.

Before they were through with it there suddenly erupted into the outer office, where Johnson and Applerod glared at each other day by day over their books, a pandemonium of gabbling. Agnes, with a little exclamation of dismay at the time she had wasted, rose in a hurry, and immediately after she passed through the door there bounded into the room a rotund little German with enormous and extremely thick glasses upon his knob of a nose, a grizzled mustache that poked straight up on both sides of that knob, and an absurd toupee that flared straight out all around on top of the bald spot to which it was pasted. Behind him trailed a pudgy man of so exactly the Herr Professor's height and build that it seemed as if they were cast in the same spherical mold, but he was much younger and had jet black hair and a jet black mustache of such tiny proportions as to excite amazement and even awe. Still behind him was an unusually large young woman, fully a head taller than either of the two men, who had an abundance of jet black hair, and was dressed in a very rich robe and wrap, both of which were somewhat soiled and worn.

"Signor R-r-r-r-icardo, der grosse tenore—Meester Burnit," introduced the rotund little German, with a deep bow commensurate with the greatness of the great tenor. "Signorina Car-r-r-avaggio—Mees-

ter Burnit. I, Mees-ter Burnit, *Ich bin* Brofessor Frühlingsvogel."

Bobby, for the lack of any other handy greeting, merely bowed and smiled, whereupon Signorina Caravaggio, stepping into a breach which otherwise would certainly have been embarrassing, seated herself comfortably upon the edge of Bobby's desk and swung one large but shapely foot while she explained matters.

"It's like this, Mr. Burnit," she confidently began: "when that dried-up little heathen, Matteo, who tried to run the Neapolitan Grand Opera Company with stage money, got us this far on a tour that is a disgrace to the profession, he had a sudden notion that he needed ocean air; so he took what few little dollars were in the treasury and hopped right on into New York.

"Here we are, then, at the place we were merely 'to make connections,' two hundred miles from our next booking and without enough money among us to buy a postage stamp. We haven't seen a cent of salary for six weeks, and the only thing we can do is to seize the props and scenery and costumes, see if they can be sold, and disband, unless somebody gallops to the rescue in a hurry. Professor Frühlingsvogel happened to know another Dutchman here who conducts an orchestra at the Orpheum, and he

sent us to you. He said you knew all the swell set and could start a benefit going if anybody in town could."

"Yes," said Bobby, smiling; "Schmirdonner telephoned me just a few minutes ago that the Herr Professor Frühlingsvogel would be up to see me, and asked me to do what I could. How many of you are there?"

"Seventy-three," promptly returned Signorina Caravaggio, "and all hungry. Forty singers and an orchestra of thirty—seventy—besides props and the stage manager and Herr Frühlingsvogel, who is the musical director."

"Where are you stopping?" asked Bobby, aghast at the size of the contract that was offered him.

"We're not," laughed the great Italian songstress. "We all went up and registered at a fourth-rate place they call the Hotel Larken, but that's as far as we got, for we were told before the ink was dry that we'd have to come across before we got a single biscuit; so there they are, scattered about the S. R. O. parts of that little two-by-twice hotel, waiting for little me to trot out and find an angel. Are you it?"

"I can't really promise what I can do," hesitated Bobby, who had never been able to refuse assistance where it seemed to be needed; "but I'll run down to the club and see some of the boys about getting up a

subscription concert for you. How much help will you need?"

"Enough to land us on little old Manhattan Island."

"And there are over seventy of you to feed and take care of for, say, three days, and then to pay railroad fares for," mused Bobby, a little startled as the magnitude of the demand began to dawn upon him. "Then there's the music-hall, advertising, printing and I suppose a score of other incidentals. You need quite a pile of money. However, I'll go down to the club at lunch time and see what I can do for you."

"I knew you would the minute I looked at you," said the Signorina confidently, which was a compliment or not, the way one looked at it. "But, say; I've got a better scheme than that, one that will let you make a little money instead of contributing. I understand the Orpheum has next week dark, through yesterday's failure of The Married Bachelor Comedy Company. Why don't you get the Orpheum for us and back our show for the week? We have twelve operas in our repertoire. The scenery and props are very poor, the costumes are only half-way decent and the chorus is the rattiest-looking lot you ever saw in your life; but they can sing. They went into the discard on account of their faces, poor things. Sup-

pose you come over and have a look. They'd melt you to tears."

"That won't be necessary," hastily objected Bobby; "but I'll meet a lot of the fellows at lunch, and afterward I'll let you know."

"After lunch!" exclaimed the Signorina with a most expressive placing of her hands over her belt, whereat the Herr Professor and Der Grosse Tenore both turned most wistfully to Bobby to see what effect this weighty plea might have upon him. "Lunch!" she repeated. "If you would carry a forkfull of steaming spaghetti into the Hotel Larken at this minute you'd start a riot. Why, Mr. Burnit, if you're going to do anything for us you've got to get into action, because we've been up since seven and we still want our breakfasts."

"Breakfast!" exclaimed Bobby, looking hastily at his watch. It was now eleven-thirty. "Come on; we'll go right over to the Larken, wherever that may be," and he exhibited as much sudden haste as if he had seen seventy people actually starving before his very eyes.

Just as the quartette stepped out of the office, Biff Bates, just coming in, bustled up to Bobby with:

"Can I see you just a minute, Bobby? Kid Mills is coming around to my place this afternoon."

"Haven't time just now, Biff," said Bobby; "but

jump into the machine with us and I'll do the 'chauffing.' That will make room for all of us. We can talk on the way to the Hotel Larken. Do you know where it is?"

"Me?" scorned Biff. "If there is an inch of this old town I can't put my finger on in the dark, blindfolded, I'll have that inch dug out and thrown away."

At the curb, with keen enjoyment of the joke of it all, Bobby gravely introduced Mr. Biff Bates, ex-champion middle-weight, to these imported artists, but, very much to his surprise, Signorina Caravaggio and Professor Bates struck up an instant and animated conversation anent Biff's well-known and justly-famous victory over Slammer Young, and so interested did they become in this conversation that instead of Biff's sitting up in the front seat, as Bobby had intended, the eminent instructor of athletics manœuvered the Herr Professor into that post of honor and climbed into the tonneau with Signor Ricardo and the Signorina, with the latter of whom he talked most volubly all the way over, to the evidently vast annoyance of Der Grosse Tenore.

The confusion of tongues must have been a very tame and quiet affair as compared to the polyglot chattering which burst upon Bobby's ears when he entered the small lobby of the Hotel Larken. The male members of the Neapolitan Grand Opera Com-

pany, almost to a man, were smoking cigarettes. There were swarthy little men and swarthy big men, there seeming to be no medium sizes among them, while the women were the most wooden-featured lot that Bobby had ever encountered, and the entire crowd was swathed in gay but dingy clothing of the most nondescript nature. Really, had Bobby not been assured that they were grand opera singers he would have taken them for a lot of immigrants, for they had that same unhappy expression of worry. The principals could be told from the chorus and the members of the orchestra from the fact that they stood aloof from the rest and from one another, gloomily nursing their grievances that they, each one the most illustrious member of the company, should thus be put to inconvenience! It was a monstrous thing that they, the possessors of glorious voices which the entire world should at once fall down and worship, should be actually hungry and out of money! It was, oh, unbelievable, atrocious, barbarous, positively inhuman!

With the entrance of the Signorina Caravaggio, bearing triumphantly with her the neatly-dressed and altogether money-like Bobby Burnit, one hundred and forty wistful eyes, mostly black and dark brown, were immediately focused in eager interest upon the possible savior. Behind the desk, perplexed and dis-

tracted but still grimly firm, stood frowzy Widow Larken herself, drawn and held to the post of duty by this vast and unusual emergency. Not one room had Madam Larken saved for all these alien warblers, not one morsel of food had she loosed from her capacious kitchen; and yet not one member of the company had she permitted to stray outside her doors while Signorina Caravaggio and Signor Ricardo and the Herr Professor Frühlingsvogel had gone out to secure an angel, two stout porters being kept at the front door to turn back the restless. If provision could be made to pay the bills of this caravan, the Widow Larken—who was shaped like a pillow with a string tied around it and wore a face like a huge, underdone apple dumpling—was too good a business woman to overlook that opportunity. Bobby took one sweeping glance at that advancing circle of one hundred and forty eyes and turned to Widow Larken.

"I will be responsible for the hotel bills of these people until further notice," said he.

The Widow Larken, looking intently at Bobby's scarf-pin, relented no whit in her uncompromising attitude.

"And who might you be?" she demanded, with a calm brow and cold determination.

"I am Robert J. Burnit," said Bobby. "I'll give you a written order if you like—or a check."

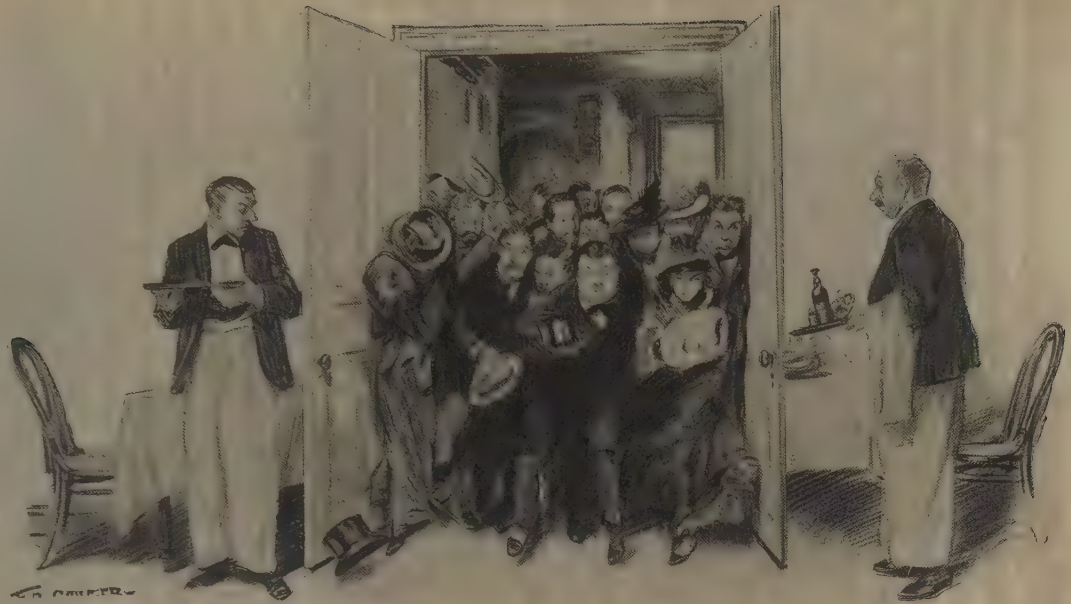
The Widow Larken's uncompromising expression instantly melted, but she did not smile—she grinned. Bobby knew precisely the cause of that amused expression, but if he had needed an interpreter, he had one at his elbow in the person of Biff Bates, who looked up at him with a reflection of the same grin.

"They're all next to you, Bobby," he observed. "The whole town knows that you're the real village goat."

The Widow Larken did not answer Bobby directly. She called back to a blue-overall-clad porter at the end of the lobby:

"Open the dining-room doors, Michael."

Signorina Caravaggio immediately said a few guttural words in German to Professor Frühlingsvogel, a few limpid words in Italian to Signor Ricardo a few crisp words in French to Madame Villenauve, a nervous but rather attractive little woman with piercing black eyes. The singers of other languages did not wait to be informed; they joined the general stampede toward the ravishing paradise of midday breakfast, and as the last of them vacated the lobby, the principals no whit behind the humble members of the chorus in crowding and jamming through that doorway, Bobby breathed a sigh of relief. Only the Signorina was left to him, and Bobby hesitated just a moment as it occurred to him that, perhaps, a more



The singers did not wait to be informed

personal entertainment was expected by this eminent songstress. Biff Bates, however, relieved him of his dilemma.

"While you're gone down to see the boys at the Idlers' Club," said Biff, "I'm going to take Miss Carry—Miss—Miss—"

"Caravaggio," interrupted the Signorina with a repetition of a laugh which had convinced Bobby that, after all, she might be a singer, though her speaking voice gave no trace of it.

"Carrie for mine," insisted Biff with a confident grin. "I'm going to take Miss Carrie out to lunch some place where they don't serve prunes. I guess the Hotel Spender will do for us."

Bobby surveyed Biff with an indulgent smile.

"Thanks," said he. "That will give me time to see what I can do."

"You take my advice, Mr. Burnit," earnestly interposed the Signorina. "Don't bother with your friends. Go and see the manager of the Orpheum and ask him about that open date. Ask him if he thinks it wouldn't be a good investment for you to back us."

Biff, the conservative; Biff, whose vote was invariably for the negative on any proposition involving an investment of Bobby's funds, unexpectedly added his weight for the affirmative.

"It's a good stunt, Bobby. Go to it," he counseled, and the Caravaggio smiled down at him.

Again Bobby laughed.

"All right, Biff," said he. "I'll hunt up the manager of the Orpheum right away."

In his machine he conveyed Biff and the prima donna to the Hotel Spender, and then drove to the Orpheum.

CHAPTER XIX

WITH THE RELUCTANT CONSENT OF AGNES, BOBBY BECOMES A PATRON OF MUSIC

THE manager of the Orpheum was a strange evolution. He was a man who had spent a lifetime in the show business, running first a concert hall that "broke into the papers" every Sunday morning with an account of from two to seven fights the night before, then an equally disreputable "burlesque" house, the broad attractions of which appealed to men and boys only. To this, as he made money, he added the cheapest and most blood-curdling melodrama theater in town, then a "regular" house of the second grade. In his career he had endured two divorce cases of the most unattractive sort, and, among quiet and conventional citizens, was supposed to have horns and a barbed tail that snapped sparks where it struck on the pavement. When he first purchased the Orpheum Theater, the most exclusive playhouse of the city, he began to appear in its lobby every night in a dinner-coat or a dress-suit, silk top-

per and all, with an almost modest diamond stud in his white shirt-front; and ladies, as they came in, asked in awed whispers of their husbands: "Is *that* Dan Spratt?" Some few who had occasion to meet him went away gasping: "Why, the man seems really nice!" Others of "the profession," about whom the public never knew, spoke his name with tears of gratitude.

Mr. Spratt, immersed in troubles of his own, scarcely looked up as Bobby entered, and only grunted in greeting.

"Spratt," began Bobby, who knew the man quite well through "sporting" events engineered by Biff Bates, "the Neapolitan Grand Opera Company is stranded here, and—"

"Where are they?" interrupted Spratt eagerly, all his abstraction gone.

"At the Hotel Larken," began Bobby again. "I—"

"Have they got their props and scenery?"

"Everything, I understand," said Bobby. "I came around to see you—"

"Who's running the show?" demanded Spratt.

"Their manager decamped with the money—with what little there was," explained Bobby, "and they came to me by accident. I understand you have an open date next week."

"It's not open now," declared Spratt. "The date is filled with the Neapolitan Grand Opera Company."

"There doesn't seem to be much use of my talking, then," said Bobby, smiling.

"Not much," said Spratt. "They're a good company, but I've noticed from the reports that they've been badly managed. The Dago that brought them over didn't know the show business in this country and tried to run the circus himself; and, of course, they've gone on the rocks. It's great luck that they landed here. I just heard a bit ago that they were in town. I suppose they're flat broke."

"Why, yes," said Bobby. "I just went up to the Hotel Larken and said I'd be responsible for their hotel bill."

"Oh," said Spratt. "Then you're backing them for their week here."

"Well, I'm not quite sure about that," hesitated Bobby.

"If you don't, I will," offered Spratt. "There's a long line of full-dress Willies here that'll draw their week's wages in advance to attend grand opera in cabs. At two and a half for the first sixteen rows they'll pack the house for the week, and every diamond in the hock-shops will get an airing for the occasion. But you saw it first, Burnit, and I won't interfere."

"Well, I don't know," Bobby again hesitated. "I haven't fully—"

"Go ahead," urged Spratt heartily. "It's your pick-up and I'll get mine. Hey, Spencer!"

A thin young man, with hair so light that he seemed to have no hair at all and no eyebrows, came in.

"We've booked the Neapolitan Grand Opera Company for next week. Have they got Caravaggio and Ricardo with them?" he asked, turning abruptly to Bobby.

Bobby, with a smile, nodded his head.

"All right, Spence; get busy on some press stuff for the afternoon papers. You can fake notices about them from what you know. Use two-inch streamers clear across the pages, then you can get some fresh stuff and the repertoire to-night for the morning papers. Play it up strong, Spence. Use plenty of space; and, say, tell Billy to get ready for a three o'clock rehearsal. Now, Burnit, let's go up to the Larken and make arrangements."

"We might just as well wait an hour," counseled Bobby. "The only one I found in the crowd who could speak English was Signorina Caravaggio."

"I know her," said Spratt. "Her other name's Nora McGinnis. Smart woman, too, and straight as a string; and sing! Why, that big ox can sing a bird off a tree."

"She's just gone over to lunch with Biff Bates at the Spender," observed Bobby, "and we'd better wait for her. She seems to be the leading spirit."

"Of course she is. Let's go right over to the Spender."

Biff Bates did not seem overly pleased when his tête-à-tête luncheon was interrupted by Bobby and Mr. Spratt, but the Signorina Nora very quickly made it apparent that business was business. Arrangements were promptly made to attach the carload of effects for back salaries due the company, and to lease these to Bobby for the week for a nominal sum. Bobby was to pay the regular schedule of salaries for that week and make what profit he could. A rehearsal of *Carmen* was to be called that afternoon at three, and a repertoire was arranged.

Feeling very much exhilarated after all this, Bobby drove out in his automobile after lunch to see Agnes Elliston. He found that young lady and Aunt Constance about to start for a drive, their carriage being already at the door, but without any ceremony he bundled them into his machine instead.

"Purely as my trustee," he explained, "Agnes must inspect my new business venture."

Aunt Constance smiled.

"The trusteeship of Agnes hasn't done you very much good so far," she observed. "As a matter of

fact, if she wanted to build up a reputation as an expert trustee, I don't think she could accomplish much by printing in her circulars the details of her past stewardship."

"I don't want her to work up a reputation as a trustee," retorted Bobby. "She suits me just as she is, and I'm inclined to thank the governor for having loaded her down with the job."

"I'm becoming reconciled to it myself," admitted Agnes, smiling up at him. "Really, I have great faith that one day you will learn how to take care of money—if the money holds out that long. What is the new venture, Bobby?"

He grinned quite cheerfully.

"I am about to become an angel," he said quite solemnly.

Aunt Constance shook her head.

"No, Bobby," she said kindly; "there *are* spots, you know, where angels fear to tread."

But Agnes took the declaration with no levity whatever.

"You don't mean in a theatrical sense?" she inquired.

"*In* a theatrical sense," he insisted. "I am about to back the Neapolitan Grand Opera Company."

"Why, Bobby!" objected Agnes, aghast. "You surely don't mean it! I never thought you would

contemplate anything so preposterous as that. I thought it was to be only a benefit!"

"It's only a temporary arrangement," he reassured her, laughing that he had been taken so seriously. "I'm arranging so that they can earn their way out of town; that's all. I am taking you down now to see their first rehearsal."

"I don't care to go," she declared, in a tone so piqued that Bobby turned to her in mute astonishment.

Aunt Constance laughed at his look of utter perplexity.

"How little you understand, Bobby," she said. "Don't you see that Agnes is merely jealous?"

"Indeed not!" Agnes indignantly denied. "That is an idea more absurd than the fact that Bobby should go into such an enterprise at all. However, since I lay myself open to such a suspicion I shall offer no further objection to going."

Bobby looked at her curiously and then he carefully refrained from chuckling, for Aunt Constance, though joking, had told the truth. Instant visions of dazzling sopranos, of mezzos and contraltos, of angelic voices and of vast beauty and exquisite gowning, had flashed in appalling procession before her mental vision. The idea, in the face of the appalling actuality, was so rich that Bobby pursued it no

further lest he spoil it, and talked about the weather and equally inane topics the rest of the way.

It was not until they had turned into the narrow alley at the side of the Orpheum, and from that to the still more narrow alley at its rear, that the zest of adventure began to make amends to Agnes for certain disagreeable moments of the ride. At the stage door a particularly bewildered-looking man with a rolling eye and a weak jaw, rendered limp and helpless by the polyglot aliens who had flocked upon him, strickenly let them in, to grope their way, amid what seemed an inextricable confusion, but was in reality the perfection of orderliness, upon the dim stage, beyond which stretched, in vast emptiness, the big, black auditorium. Upon the stage, chattering in shrill voices, were the forty members of the company, still in their queer clothing, while down in front, where shaded lights—seeming dull and discouraged amid all the surrounding darkness—streamed upon the music, were the members of the orchestra, chattering just as volubly. The general note was quite different in pitch from the one Bobby had heard that morning, for since he had seen them the members of the organization had been fed, and life looked cheerful.

Wandering at a loss among these people, and trying in the dim twilight to find some face that he knew,

the ears of Bobby and his party were suddenly assailed by an extremely harsh and penetrating voice which shouted:

"Clear!"

This was accompanied by a sharp clap from a pair of very broad hands. The chattering suddenly took on a rapid crescendo, ascending a full third in the scale and then dying abruptly in a little high falsetto shriek; and Bobby, with a lady upon either arm, found his little trio immediately alone in the center of the stage, a row of dim footlights cutting off effectually any view into the vast emptiness of the auditorium.

"Hey, you; *clear!*" came the harsh voice again, accompanied by another sharp clap of the hands, and a bundle of intense fighting energy bounced out from the right tormentor wing, in the shape of a gaunt, fiercely-mustached and entirely bald man of about forty-five, who appeared perpetually to be in the last stages of distraction.

"Who do you weesh to see?" demanded the gaunt man, in a very decided foreign accent. He had made a very evident attempt to be quite polite indeed, and forgiving of people who did not know enough to spring for the wings at the sound of that magic word, "Clear!"

Any explanations that Bobby might have tried to

make were happily prevented by a voice from the yawning blackness—a quiet voice, a voice of authority, the voice of Mr. Spratt.

"Come right down in front here, Burnit. Jimmy, show the gentleman how to get down."

"Thees way," snapped the gaunt man, with evident relief but no abatement whatever of his briskness, and he very hastily walked over to the right wings, where Jimmy, the house electrician, piloted the trio with equal relief through the clustered mass of singers to the door behind the boxes. As they emerged into the auditorium the raucous voice of the gaunt man was heard to shout: "All ready now. *Carmen* all ze way through." An apparent repetition of which statement he immediately made with equal raucousness in two or three languages. There was a call to Caravaggio in English, to Ricardo and the Signors Fivizzano and Rivaroli in Italian, to Messrs. Philippi and Schaerbeeken in Spanish and Dutch, to Madam Villenauve in French, to Madam Kadanoff in Russian, and to Mademoiselle Török in Hungarian, to know if they were ready; then, in rough but effective German, he informed the Herr Professor down in the orchestra that all was prepared, clapped his hands, cried "Overture," and immediately plunged to the right upper entrance, marked by two chairs, where, with shrill objurgations, he began instructing

and drilling the Soldiers' Chorus out of certain remembered awkwardnesses, as Herr Frühlingsvogel's baton fell for the overture.

Shorn of all the glamor that scenic environment, light effects and costume could give them, it was a distinct shock to Agnes to gaze in wondering horror from each one of those amazing faces to the other, and when the cigarette girls trooped out, amazement gave way to downright consternation. Nevertheless, she cheered up considerably, and the apex of her cheerfulness was reached when the oversized Signorina Caravaggio sang, very musically, however, the rôle of the petite and piquant Carmen. It was then that, sitting by Bobby in the darkness, Agnes observed with a sigh of content:

"Your trustee quite approves, Bobby. I don't mind being absolutely truthful for once in my life. I *was* a little jealous. But how could I be? Really, their voices are fine."

Mr. Spratt, too, was of that opinion, and he came back to Bobby to say so most emphatically.

"They'll do," said he. "After the first night they'll have this town crazy. If the seat sale don't go right for Monday we'll pack the house with paper, and the rest of the week will go big. Just hear that Ricardo! The little bit of a sawed-off toad sings like a canary. If you don't look at 'em, they're great."

They *were* superb. From the throats of that ill-favored chorus there came divine harmony, smooth, evenly-balanced, exhilarating, almost flawless, and as the great musical poem of passion unfolded and the magnificent aria of Don José was finished in the second act, the little group of listeners down in front burst into involuntary applause, to which there was but one dissenting voice. This voice, suddenly evolving out of the darkness at Bobby's side, ejaculated with supreme disgust:

"Well, what do you think of that! Why, that fat little fishworm of a Dago is actually gone bug-house over Miss McGinnis," a fact which had been obvious to all of them the minute small Ricardo began to sing his wonderful love song to large Caravaggio.

The rest of them had found only amusement in the fact, but to Biff Bates there was nothing funny about this. He sat in speechless disapproval throughout the balance of that much-interrupted performance, wherein Professor Frühlingsvogel, now and then, stopped his music with a crash to shriek an excited direction that it was all wrong, that it was execrable, that it was a misdemeanor, a crime, a murder to sing it in that way! The passage must be all sung over; or, at other times, the gaunt stage director, whose name was Monsieur Noire, would rush with a hoarse howl down to Herr Professor, order him to stop the

music, and, turning, berate some unfortunate performer who had defied the conventions of grand opera by acting quite naturally. On the whole, however, it was a very creditable performance, and Bobby's advisers gave the project their unqualified approval.

"It is really a commendable thing," Aunt Constance complacently announced, "to encourage music of this order, and to furnish such a degree of cultivation for the masses."

It was a worthy project indeed. As for the company itself there could be no question that it was a good one. No one expected acting in grand opera, no one expected that the performers would be physically adaptable to their parts. The voice! The voice was all. Even Agnes admitted that it was a splendid thing to be a patron of the fine arts; but Bobby, in his profound new wisdom and his thorough conversion to strictly commercial standards, said with vast iconoclasm:

"You are overlooking the main point. I am not so anxious to become a patron of the fine arts as I am to make money," with which terrible heresy he left them at home, with a thorough understanding that he was quite justified in his new venture; though next morning, when he confided the fact to Johnson, that worthy, with a sigh, presented him with an appropriate missive from among those in the gray envelopes

left in his care by the late John Burnit. It was inscribed:

To My Son Robert, Upon His Deciding to Back a Theatrical Venture

"Sooner or later, every man thinks it would be a fine thing to run a show, and the earlier in life it happens the sooner a man will have it out of his system. I tried it once myself, and I know. So good luck to you, my boy, and here's hoping that you don't get stung too badly."

CHAPTER XX

STILL WITH THE RELUCTANT CONSENT OF AGNES, BOBBY INVESTS IN THE FINE ARTS

THAT week's "season of grand opera" was an unqualified success, following closely the lines laid down by the experienced Mr. Spratt. Caravaggio and Ricardo and Philippi and Villenauve became household words, after the Monday night performance of *Carmen*, and for the balance of the week shining carriages rolled up to the entrance of the Orpheum, disgorging load after load of high-hatted gentlemen and long-plumed ladies. Before the end of the engagement it was definitely known that Bobby's investment would yield a profit, even deducting for the days of idleness during which he had been compelled to support the rehearsing company. The powers of darkness thereupon set vigorously to work upon him to carry the company on through the rest of its season.

It was then that the storm broke. Against his going further with the company Agnes Elliston interposed an objection so decided and so unflattering

that the *entente cordiale* at the Elliston home was strained dangerously near to the breaking point, and in this she was aided and abetted by Aunt Constance, who ridiculed him, and by Uncle Dan Elliston, who took him confidentially for a grave and hardheaded remonstrance. Chalmers, Johnson, and even Applerod wrestled with him in spirit; his friends at the Idlers' Club "guyed" him unmercifully, and even Biff Bates, though his support was earnestly sought by the Signorina Caravaggio, also counseled him roughly against it, and through it all Bobby was made to feel that he was a small boy who had proposed to eat a peck of green apples and then go in swimming in dog-days. Another note from his father, handed to him by the faithful and worried Johnson, was the deciding straw:

To My Son Robert, About That Theatrical Venture

"When a man who knows nothing of the business backs a show, there's usually a woman at the bottom of it—and that kind of woman is mostly rank poison to a normal man, even if she is a good woman. No butterfly ever goes back into its chrysalis and becomes a grub again. Let birds of a feather flock together, Bobby."

That unfortunate missive, for once shooting so wide the mark, pushed Bobby over the edge. There was

a streak of stubbornness in him which, well developed and turned into proper channels, was likely to be very valuable, but until he learned to use that stubbornness in the right way it bade fair to plunge him into more difficulties than he could extricate himself from with profit. Even Agnes, reading that note, indignantly agreed with Bobby that he was being unjustly misread.

"It is absurd," he explained to her. "This is the first dividend-paying investment I have been able to make so far, and I'm going to keep it up just as long as I can make money out of it. I'd be very foolish if I didn't. Besides, this is just a little in-between flyer, while I'm conservatively waiting for a good, legitimate opening. It can take, at most, but a very small part of my two hundred and fifty thousand.

Agnes, though defending him against his father, was still reluctant about the trip, but suddenly, with a curious smile, she withdrew all objections and even urged him to go ahead.

"Bobby," said she, still with that curious smile and strangely shining eyes, and putting both her hands upon his shoulders, "I see that you must go ahead with this. I—I guess it will be good for you. Somehow, I think that this is to be your last folly, that you are really learning that the world is not all polo and honor-bets. So go ahead—and I'll wait here."

He could not know how much that hurt her. He only knew, after she had talked more lightly of his trip, that he had her full and free consent, and, highly elated with his first successful business venture, he took up the contracts of the Neapolitan Grand Opera Company where Signor Matteo, the decamped manager and producer, had dropped them. The members of the company having attached the scenery and effects for back salaries, sold them to Bobby for ten thousand dollars, and he immediately found himself confronted by demands for settlements, with the alternative of damage suits, from the two cities in which the company had been booked for the two past weeks.

Had Bobby not bound himself irrevocably to contracts which made him liable for the salaries of every member of this company for the next twenty weeks, he would have withdrawn instantly at the first hint of these suits; but, now that he was in for it, he promptly compromised them at a rate which made Spratt furious.

"If I'd thought," said Spratt angrily in the privacy of the Orpheum office, "that you were sucker enough to get roped in for the full season, I'd have tossed you out of the running for this week. This game is a bigger gamble than the Stock Exchange. The smartest producers in the business never know

when they have a winner or a loser. More than that, while all actors are hard to handle, of all the combinations on earth, a grand opera company is the worst. I'll bet a couple of cold bottles that before you're a week on the road you'll have leaks in your dirigible over some crazy dramatic stunts that are not in the book of any opera of the Neapolitan repertoire."

The prediction was so true that it was proved that very night, which was Friday, during the repetition of *Carmen*. It seemed that Biff Bates, by means of the supreme dominance of the Caravaggio, had been made free of the stage, a rare privilege, and one that enabled Biff to spend his time, under unusual and romantic circumstances, very much in the company of the Celtic Signorina; all of which was very much to the annoyance, distress and fury of Signor Ricardo, especially on *Carmen* night. At all other times the great Ricardo thought very well indeed of the Signorina Nora, only being in any degree near to unfaithfulness when, on *Aïda* nights, he sang to vivacious little Madam Villenauve; but on *Carmen* nights he was devotedly, passionately, madly in love with the divine Car-r-r-r-avaggio! Else how could he sing the magnificent second act aria? Life without her on those nights would be a hollow mockery, the glance of any possible rival in

her direction a desecration. Why, he even had to restrain himself to keep from doing actual damage to Philippi, who, though on the shady side of forty-five, still sang a most dashing Escamillo; nor was his jealousy less poignant because Philippi and Caravaggio were sworn enemies.

Thus it may be understood—by any one, at least, who has ever loved ecstatically and fervidly and even hectically, like the great Ricardo—how on Monday and Wednesday nights and the Thursday matinée, all of which were Caravaggio performances, he resented Biff's presence. From dark corners he more darkly watched them chatting in frank enjoyment of each other's company; he made unexpected darts in front of their very eyes to greet them with the most alarming scowls; and because he insolently brushed the shoulder of the peaceably inclined and self-sure Biff upon divers occasions, and Biff made no sign of resentment, he imagined that Biff trembled in his boots whenever he noted the approach of the redoubtable Ricardo with his infinitesimal but ferocious mustachios. Great, then, was his wonder, to say nothing of his rage, when Biff, after all the scowls and shoulderings that he had received on Thursday, actually came around for Friday night's *Carmen* performance!

Even before the fierce Ricardo had gone into his

dressing-room he was already taking upon himself the deadly character of Don José, and his face surged red with fury when he saw Biff Bates, gaily laughing as if no doom impended, come in at the stage door with the equally gay and care-free Caravaggio. But after Signor Ricardo had donned the costume and the desperateness of the brigadier Don José—it was then that the fury sank into his soul! And that fury boiled and seethed as, during the first and second acts, he found in the wings Signorina Car-r-r-r-r-r-avaggio absorbed in pleasant but very significant chat with his deadly enemy, the crude, unmusical, inartistic, soulless Biffo de Bates-s-s-s! But, ah! There was another act to come, the third act, at the beginning of which the property man handed him the long, sharp, wicked-looking, bloodthirsty knife with which he was to fight Escamillo, and with which in the fourth act he was to kill Carmen. The mere possession of that knife wrought the great tenor's soul to gory tragedy; so much so that immediately after the third act curtain calls he rushed directly to the spot where he knew the contemptible Signor Biffo de Bates-s-s-s to be standing, and with shrill Latin imprecations flourished that keen, glistening blade before the eyes of the very much astounded Biff.

For a moment, thoroughly incredulous, Biff re-

fused to believe it, until a second demonstration compelled him to acknowledge that the great Ricardo actually meant threatening things toward himself. When this conviction forced its way upon him, Biff calmly reached out, and, with a grip very much like a bear-trap, seized Signor Ricardo by the forearm of the hand which held the knife. With his unengaged hand Biff then smacked the Signor Ricardo right severely on the wrist.

"You don't mean it, you know, Sig-nor Garlic," he calmly observed. "If I thought you did I'd smack you on both wrists. Why, you little red balloon, I ain't afraid of any mutt on earth that carries a knife like that, as long as I got my back to the wall."

Still holding the putty-like Signor by the forearm, he delicately abstracted from his clasp the huge knife, and, folding it up gravely, handed it back to him; then deliberately he turned his back on the Signor and pushed his way through the delightedly horror-stricken emotionalists who had gathered at the fray, and strolled over to where Signorina Caravaggio had stood an interested and mirth-shaken observer.

"You mustn't think all Italians are like that, Biff," she said, her first impulse, as always, to see justice done; "but singers are a different breed. I don't think he's bluffing, altogether. If he got a real good

chance some place in the dark, and was sure that he wouldn't be caught, he might use a stiletto on you."

"If he ever does I'll slap his forehead," said Biff. "But say, he uses that cleaver again in the show?"

The Signorina Nora shrugged her shoulders.

"He's supposed to stab me with it in this next act."

"He is!" exclaimed Biff. "Well, just so he don't make any mistake I'm going over and paste him one."

It was not necessary, for Signor Ricardo, after studying the matter over and seeing no other way out of it, proceeded to have a fit. No one, not even the illustrious Signor, could tell just how much of that fit was deliberate and artificial, and just how much was due to an overwrought sensitive organization, but certain it was that the Signor Ricardo was quite unable to go on with the performance, and Monsieur Noire himself, as agitated as a moment before the great Ricardo had been, frantically rushed up to Biff and grabbed him roughly by the shoulders.

"Too long," shrieked he, "we have let you be annoying the artists, by reason of the Caravaggio. But now you shall do the skidooing."

With a laugh Biff looked back over his shoulder at the Caravaggio, and permitted Monsieur Noire

to eject him bodily from the stage door upon the alley.

The next morning, owing to the prompt action and foresightedness of Spratt, all the papers contained the very pretty story that the great Ricardo had succumbed to his own intensity of emotions after the third act of *Carmen*, and had been unable to go on, giving way to the scarcely less great Signor Dulceo. That same morning Bobby was confronted by the first of a long series of similar dilemmas. The Signorina Caravaggio must leave the company or Signor Ricardo would do so. No stage was big enough to hold the two; moreover, Ricardo meant to have the heart's blood of Signor Biffo de Bates-s-s-s!

With a sigh, Bobby, out of his ignorance and independence, took the only possible course to preserve peace, and emphatically told Signor Ricardo to pack up and go as quickly as possible, which he went away vowing to do. Naturally the great tenor thought better of it after that, and though he had already been dropped from the cast of *Il Trovatore* on Saturday afternoon, he reported just the same. And he went on with the company.

It was not until they went upon the road, however, that Bobby fully realized what a lot of irresponsible, fretful, peevish children he had upon his hands. With the exception of serene Nora McGin-

nis, every one of the principals was at daggers drawn with all the others, sulking over the least advantage obtained by any one else, and accepting advantage of their own as only a partial payment of their supreme rank. The one most at war with her own world was Madam Villenauve, whose especial *bête noire* was the MeeGeenees, whom, by no possibility, could she ever under any circumstance be induced to call Caravaggio.

On the second day of their next engagement, as Bobby strode through the corridor of the hotel, shortly after luncheon, he was stopped by Madam Villenauve, who had been waiting for him in the door of her room. She was herself apparently just dressing to go out, for her coiffure was made and she had on a short underskirt, a kimono-like dressing-jacket and her street shoes.

"I wish to speak wiz you on some beezness, Meester Burnit," she told him abruptly, and with an imperatively beckoning hand stepped back with a bow for him to enter.

With just a moment of surprised hesitation he stepped into the room, whereupon the Villenauve promptly closed the door. A week before Bobby would have been a trifle astonished by this proceeding, but in that week he had seen so many examples of unconscious unconventionalities in and about the

dressing-rooms and at the hotel, that he had readjusted his point of view to meet the peculiar way of life of these people, and, as usual with readjustments, had readjusted himself too far. He found the room in a litter, with garments of all sorts cast about in reckless disorder.

"I have been seeing you last night," began Madam Villenauve, shaking her finger at him archly as she swept some skirts off a chair for him to sit down, and then took her place before her dressing-table, where she added the last deft touch to her coiffure. "I have been seeing you smiling at ze reedeec'lous Carmen. Oh, la, la! Carmen!" she shrilled. "It is I, monsieur, I zat am ze Carmen. It was zis Matteo, the scoundrel who run away wiz our money, zat allow le Ricardo to say whom he like to sing to for Carmen. Ricardo ees in loaf wiz la MeeGeenees. Le Ricardo is a fool, so zis Ricardo sing Carmen ever tam to ze great, grosse monstair MeeGeenees; an' ever'body zey laugh. Ze chorus laugh, ze principals laugh, le Monsieur Noire he laugh, even zat Frühlingsvogel zat have no humair, he laugh, an' ze audience laugh, an' las' night I am seeing you laugh. Ees eet not so? *Mais!* It is absurd! It is reedeec'lous. Le Ricardo make fool over la MeeGeenees. *I* sing ze Carmen! I *am* ze Carmen! You hear me sing Aïda? Eet ees zat way.

I sing Carmen. Now I s'all sing Carmen again! Ees eet nôt ?"

As Madam Villenauve talked, punctuating her remarks with quick, impatient little gestures, she jerked off her dressing-jacket and threw it on the floor, and Bobby saved himself from panic by reminding himself that her frank anatomical display was, in the peculiar ethics of these people, no more to be noticed than if she were in an evening gown, which was very reasonable, after all, once you understood the code. Still voicing her indignation at having been displaced in the rôle of Carmen by the utterly impossible and preposterous Caravaggio, she caught up her waist and was about to slip it on, while Bobby, with an amused smile, reflected that presently he would no doubt be nonchalantly requested to hook it in the back, when some one tried the door-knob. A knock followed and Madam Villenauve went to the door.

"Who ees it?" she asked with her hand on the knob.

"It is I; Monsieur Noire," was the reply.

"Oh, la, come in, zen," she invited, and threw open the door.

Monsieur Noire entered, but, finding Bobby in the chair by the dresser, stopped uncertainly in the doorway.

"Oh, come on een," she gaily invited; "we are all ze good friends; *oui?*"

It appeared that Monsieur Noire came in all politeness, yet with rigid intention, to inquire about a missing piece of music from the score of *Les Huguenots,* and Madam Villenauve, in all politeness and yet with much indignation, assured him that she did not have it; whereupon Monsieur Noire, with all politeness but cold insistence, demanded that she look for it; whereupon Madam Villenauve, though once more protesting that she had it not, in all politeness and yet with considerable asperity, declared that she would not search for it; whereupon Monsieur Noire, observing the piece of music in question peeping out from beneath a conglomerate pile of newspapers, clothing and toilet articles, laid hands upon it and departed. Madam Villenauve, entirely unruffled now that it was all over, but still chattering away with great volubility about the crime of Carmen, finished her dressing and bade Bobby hook the back of her waist, and by sheer calmness and certainty of intention forced him to accompany her over to rehearsal.

Whatever annoyance he might have felt over this was lost in his amusement when he reached the theater in finding Biff Bates upon the stage waiting for him; and Biff, while waiting, was quite excusably

whiling the time away with the adorable Miss McGinnis.

"You see, Young Fitz lives here," Biff brazenly explained, "and I run up to see him about that exhibition night I'm going to have at the gym. I'm going to have him go on with Kid Jeffreys."

"Biff," said Bobby warmly, "I want to congratulate you on your business enterprise. Have you seen Young Fitz yet?"

"Well, no," confessed Biff. "I just got here about an hour ago. I didn't know your hotel, but it was a cinch from the bills to tell where the show was, so I came right around to the theater to see you first."

"Exactly," admitted Bobby. "Do you *expect* to see Young Fitz?"

"Well, maybe, if I get time," said Biff with a sheepish grin. "Just now I'm going out for a drive with Miss McGinnis."

"Caravaggio," corrected that young lady with a laugh.

"McGinnis for mine," declared Biff. "By the way, Bobby, I saw a certain party before I left town and she gave me this letter for you. Certain party is as cheerful as a chunk of lead about your trip, Bobby, but she makes the swellest bluff I ever saw that she's tickled to death with it."

With this vengeful shot in retaliation for his ex-

cuse about Young Fitz having been doubted he sailed away with the Caravaggio, who, though required to report at every rehearsal, was not in the cast for that night and was readily excused from further attendance. Since Bobby had received a very pleasant letter from Agnes when he got up that morning he opened this missive with a touch of curiosity added to the thrill with which he always took in his hands any missive, no matter how trivial, from her. It was but a brief note calling attention to the enclosed newspaper clipping, and wishing him success in his new venture. The clipping was a flamboyant article describing the decision of the city council to install a magnificent new ten-million-dollar waterworks system, and the personally interesting item in it, ringed around with a pencil mark, was that Silas Trimmer had been appointed by Mayor Garland as president of the waterworks commission.

It was not news that could alter his fortunes in any way so far as he could see, but it did remind him, with a strange whipping of his conscience, that, after all, his place was back home, and that his proper employment should be the looking after his home interests. For the first time he began to have a dim realization that a man's place was among his enemies, where he could watch them.

CHAPTER XXI

WHEREIN THE FINE ARTS PRESENT BOBBY WITH A MOST EMBARRASSING DILEMMA

IT HAD become by no means strange to Bobby, even before the company "took the road," that some one of the principals should attach themselves to him in all his possible goings and comings, for each and every one of them had some complaint to make about all the others. They wanted readjustments of cast, better parts to sing, better dressing-rooms, better hotel quarters, better everything than the others had, and with the unhappy and excited Monsieur Noire he shared this unending strife. At first he saw it all in a humorous light, but, by and by, he came to a period of ennui and tried to rebel. This period gave him more trouble than the other, so within a short time he lapsed into an apathetic complaint-receptacle and dreamed no more of walking or riding to and from the hotel without one of these impulsive children of art, who seethed perpetually in self-prodded artificial emotions, attached to him. If it seemed strange at times that Madam

Villenauve was more frequently with him than any of the others he only reflected that the vivacious little Frenchwoman was much more persistent; nor did he note that, presently, the others came rather to give way before her and to let her monopolize him more and more.

It was during the third week that Professor Frühlingsvogel was to endure another birthday, and Bobby, full of generous impulses as always, announced at rehearsal that in honor of the Professor's unwelcome milestone he intended to give a little supper that night at the hotel. Madam Villenauve, standing beside him, suddenly threw her arms around his neck and kissed him smack upon the lips, with a quite enthusiastic declaration, in very charmingly warped English, that he was "a dear old sing." Bobby, reverting quickly in mind to the fact of the extreme unconventionality of these people, took the occurrence quite as a matter of course, though it embarrassed him somewhat. He rather counted himself a prig that he could not sooner get over this habit of embarrassment, and every time Madam Villenauve insisted on calling him into her dressing-room when she was in much more of dishabille than he would have thought permissible in ordinary people, he felt that same painful lack of sophistication.

At the supper that night, Madam Villenauve, with

a great show of playful indignation, routed Madam Kadanoff from her accidental seat next to Bobby, and, in giving up the seat, which she did quite gracefully enough, Madam Kadanoff dropped some remark in choice Russian, which, of course, Bobby did not understand, but which Madam Villenauve did, for she laughed a little shrilly and, with an engaging upward smile at Bobby, observed:

"I theenk I shall say it zat zees so chairming Monsieur Burnit is soon to marry wiz me; ees eet not, monsieur?"

Whereupon Bobby, with his customary courtesy, replied:

"No gentleman would care to deny such a charming and attractive possibility, Madam Villenauve."

But the gracious speech was of the lips alone, and spoken with a warning glare against "kidding" at the grinning Biff Bates, who had found business of urgent importance for that night in the city where the company was booked. Bobby, in fact, had begun to tire very much of the whole business. To begin with, he found the organization a much more expensive one to keep up than he had imagined. The route, badly laid out, was one of tremendous long jumps; of his singers, like other rare and expensive creatures, extravagant care must be taken, and not every place that they stopped was so eager for grand

opera as it might have been. At the end of three weeks he was able to compute that he had lost about a thousand dollars a week, and in the fourth week they struck an engagement so fruitless that even the cheerful Caravaggio became dismal.

"It's a sure enough frost," she confided to Bobby; "but cheer up, for the worst is yet to come. Your route sheet for the next two months looks like a morgue to me, and unless you interpolate a few coon songs in *Tannhäuser* and some song and dance specialties between the acts of *Les Huguenots* you're gone. You know I used to sing this route in musical comedy, and, on the level, I've got a fine part waiting for me right now in *The Giddy Queen.* I like this highbrow music all right, but the people that come to hear it make me so sad. You're a good sport, though, and as long as you need me I'll stick."

"Thanks," said Bobby sincerely. "It's a pleasure to speak to a real human being once in a while, even if you don't offer any encouragement. However, we'll not be buried till we're dead, notwithstanding that we now enter upon the graveyard route."

Doleful experience, however, confirmed the Caravaggio's gloomy prophecy. They embarked now upon a season of one and two and three night stands that gave Bobby more of the real discomforts of life than he had ever before dreamed possible. To close

a performance at eleven, to pack and hurry for a twelve-thirty train, to ride until five o'clock in the morning—a distance too short for sleep and too long to stay awake—to tumble into a hotel at six and sleep until noon, this was one program; to close a performance at eleven, to wait up for a four-o'clock train, to ride until eight and get into a hotel at nine, with a vitally necessary rehearsal between that and the evening performance, was another program, either one of which wore on health and temper and purse alike. The losses now exceeded two thousand dollars a week. Moreover, the frequent visits of Biff Bates and his constant baiting of Signor Ricardo had driven that great tenor to such a point of distraction that one night, being near New York, he drew his pay and departed without notice. There was no use, in spite of Monsieur Noire's frantic insistence, in trying to make the public believe that the lank Dulceo was the fat Ricardo; moreover, immediately upon his arrival in New York, Signor Ricardo let it be known that he had left the Neapolitan Company, so the prestige of the company fell off at once, for the "country" press pays sharp attention to these things.

A letter from Johnson at just this time also had its influence upon Bobby, who now was in an humble, not an antagonistic mood, and quite ripe for

advice. Mr. Johnson had just conferred with Mr. Bates upon his return from a visit to the Neapolitan Company, and Mr. Bates had detailed to Mr. Johnson much that he had seen with his own eyes, and much that the Caravaggio had told him. Mr. Johnson, thereupon, begging pardon for the presumption, deemed this a fitting time, from what he had heard, to forward Bobby the inclosed letter, which, in its gray envelope, had been left behind by Bobby's father:

To My Son in the Midst of a Losing Fight

"Determination is a magnificent quality, but bull-headedness is not. The most foolish kind of pride on earth is that which makes a man refuse to acknowledge himself beaten when he is beaten. It takes a pretty brave man, and one with good stuff in him, to let all his friends know that he's been licked. Figure this out."

Bobby wrestled with that letter all night. In the morning he received one from Agnes which served to increase and intensify the feeling of homesickness that had been overwhelming him. She, too, had seen Biff Bates. She had asked him out to the house expressly to talk with him, but she had written a pleasant, cheerful letter wherein she hoped that the end

of the season would repay the losses she understood that he was enduring; but she admitted that she was very lonesome without him. She gave him quite a budget of gay gossip concerning all the young people of his set, and after he had read that letter he was quite prepared to swallow his grit and make the announcement that for a week had been almost upon his tongue.

Through Monsieur Noire, at rehearsal that afternoon, he declared his intention of closing the season, and offered them each two weeks' advance pay and their fare to New York. It was Signorina Caravaggio who broke the hush that followed this announcement.

"You're a good sort, Bobby Burnit," she said, with kindly intent to lead the others, "and I'll take your offer and thank you."

It appeared that the majority of them had dreaded some such dénouement as this; some had been prepared for even less advantageous terms, and several, upon direct inquiry, announced their willingness to accept this proposal. A few declared their intention to hold him for the full contract. These were the ones who had made sure of his entire solvency, and these afterward swayed the balance of the company to a stand which won a better compromise. When Monsieur Noire, with a curious smile, asked

Madam Villenauve, however, she laughed very pleasantly.

"Oh, non," said she; "it does not apply, zis offair, to me. I do not need it, for Monsieur Burnit ees to marry wiz me zis Christmastam."

"I am afraid, Madam Villenauve, that we will have to quit joking about that," said Bobby coldly.

"Joking!" screamed the shrill voice of madam. "Eet ees not any joke. You can not fool wiz me, Monsieur Burnit. You mean to tell all zese people zat you are not to marry wiz me?"

"I certainly have no intention of the kind," said Bobby impatiently, "nor have I ever expressed such an intention."

"We s'all see about zat," declared the madam with righteous indignation. "We s'all see how you can amuse yourself. You refuse to keep your word zat you marry me? All right zen, you do! I bring suit to-day for brich promise, and I have here one, two, three, a dozen weetness. I make what you call subpœna on zem all. We s'all see."

"Monsieur Noire," said Bobby, more sick and sore than panic-stricken, "you will please settle matters with all these people and come to me at the hotel for whatever checks you need," and, hurt beyond measure at this one more instance that there were, really, rapacious schemers in the world, who sought loathsome

advantage at the expense of decent folk, Bobby crept away, to hide himself and try to understand.

They were here for the latter half of the week, and, since business seemed to be fairly good, Bobby had decided to fill this engagement, canceling all others. In the morning it seemed that Madam Villenauve had been in earnest in her absurd intentions, for, in his room, at eleven o'clock, he was served with papers in the breach-of-promise suit of Villenauve *versus* Burnit, and the amount of damages claimed was the tremendous sum of one hundred and fifty thousand dollars, an amount, of course, only commensurate with Madam Villenauve's standing in the profession and her earning capacity as an artist, her pride and shattered feelings and the dashing to earth of her love's young dream being of corresponding value. Moreover, he learned that an injunction had been issued completely tying up his bank account. That was the parting blow. Settling up with the performers upon a blood-letting basis, he most ignominiously fled. Before he went away, however, Signorina Nora McGinnis Caravaggio called him to one side and confided a most delicate message to him.

"Your friend, Mr. Bates," she began with an embarrassed hesitation quite unusual in the direct Irish girl; "he's a nice boy, from the ground up, and give him an easy word from me. But, Mr.

Burnit, give him a hint not to do any more traveling on my account; for I've got a husband back in New York that ain't worth the rat poison to put him out of his misery, but I'm not getting any divorces. One mistake is enough. But don't be too hard on me when you tell Biff. Honest, up to just the last, I thought he'd come only to see you; but I enjoyed his visits." And in the eyes of the Caravaggio there stood real tears.

A newsboy met Bobby on the train with the morning papers from home, and in them he read delightfully flavored and spiced accounts of the great Villenauve breach-of-promise case, embellished with many details that were entirely new to him. He had not counted on this phase of the matter, and it struck him almost as with an ague. The notoriety, the askance looks he would receive from his more conservative acquaintances, the "ragging" he would get at his clubs, all these he could stand. But Agnes! How could he ever face her? How would she receive him? From the train he took a cab directly home and buried himself there to think it all over. He spent a morning of intense dejection and an afternoon of the utmost misery. In the evening, not caring to dine in solitary gloom at home nor to appear yet among his fellows, he went out to an obscure restaurant in the neighborhood and ate his dinner, then came back

again to his lonely room, seeing nothing ahead of him but an evening of melancholy alone. His butler, however, met him in the hall on his return.

"Miss Elliston called up on the 'phone while you were out, sir."

"Did you tell her I was at home?" asked Bobby, with quick apprehension.

"Yes, sir; you hadn't told me not to do so, sir; and she left word that you were to come straight out to the house as soon as you came in."

"Very well," said Bobby, and went into the library.

He sat down before the telephone and rested his hand upon the receiver for perhaps as much as five long minutes of hesitation, then abruptly he turned away from that unsatisfactory means of communication and had his car ordered; then hurriedly changed to the evening clothes he had not intended to don that night.

In most uncertain anticipation, but quite sure of the most vigorous "blowing up" of his career, he whirled out to the home of the Ellistons and ascended the steps. The ring at the bell brought the ever imperturbable Wilkins, who nodded gravely upon seeing that it was Bobby and, relieving him of his coat and hat, told him:

"Right up to the Turkish room, sir."

There seemed a strange quietness about the house,

and he felt more and more as if he might be approaching a sentence as he climbed the silent stairs. At the door of the Turkish room, however, Agnes met him with outstretched hands and a smile of welcome which bore traces of quite too much amusement for his entire comfort. When she had drawn him within the big alcove she laughed aloud, a light laugh in which there was no possible trace of resentment, and it lifted from his mind the load that had been oppressing it all day long.

"I'm afraid you haven't heard," he began awkwardly.

"Heard!" she repeated, and laughed again. "Why, Bobby, I read all the morning papers and all the evening papers, and I presume there will be excellent reading in every one of them for days and days to come."

"And you're not angry?" he said, astounded.

"Angry!" she laughed. "Why, you poor Bobby. I remember this Madam Villenauve perfectly, besides seeing her ten-years-ago pictures in the papers, and you don't suppose for a minute that I could be jealous of her, do you? Moreover, I can prove by Aunt Constance and Uncle Dan that I predicted just this very thing when you first insisted upon going on the road."

He looked around, dreading the keen satire of

Uncle Dan and the incisive ridicule of Aunt Constance, but she relieved his mind of that fear.

"We were all invited out to dinner to-night, but I refused to go, for really I wanted to soften the blow for you. There is nobody in the house but myself and the servants. Now, do behave, Bobby! Wait a minute, sir! I've something else to crush you with. Have you seen the evening papers?"

No; the morning papers had been enough for him.

"Well, I'll tell you what they are doing. The Consolidated Illuminating and Power Company has secured an order from the city council compelling the Brightlight Electric Company to remove their poles from Market Street."

Bobby caught his breath sharply. Stone and Sharpe and Garland, the political manipulators of the city, and its owners, lock, stock and barrel were responsible for this. They had taken advantage of his absence.

"What a fool I have been," he bitterly confessed, "to have taken up with this entirely irregular and idiotic enterprise, a venture of which I knew nothing whatever, and let go the serious fight I had intended to make on Stone and his crowd."

"Never mind, Bobby," said Agnes. "I have a suspicion that you have cut a wisdom-tooth. I rather imagined that you needed this one last folly as a sort

of relapse before complete convalescence, to settle you down and bring you back to me for a more serious effort. I see that the most of your money is tied up in this embarrassing suit, and when I read that you were on your way home I went to Mr. Chalmers and got him to arrange for the release of some bonds. Following the provisions of your father's will your next two hundred and fifty thousand is waiting for you. Moreover, Bobby, this time I want you to listen to your trustee. I have found a new business for you, one about which you know nothing whatever, but one that you must learn; I want to put a weapon into your hands with which to fight for everything you have lost."

He looked at her in wonder.

"I always told you I needed you," he declared. "When *are* you going to marry me?"

"When you have won your fight, Bobby, or when you have proved entirely hopeless," she replied with a smile in which there was a certain amount of wistfulness.

"You're a good sort, Agnes," he said a little huskily, and he pondered for some little time in awe over the existence of women like this. "I guess the governor was mighty right in making you my trustee, after all. But what is this business?"

"The *Evening Bulletin* is for sale, I have learned.

Just now it is an independent paper, but it seems to me you could not have a better weapon, with your following, for fighting your political and business enemies."

"I'll think that over very seriously," he said with much soberness. "I have refused everybody's advice so far, and have taken only my own. I have begun to believe that I am not the wisest person in the world; also I have come to believe that there are more ways to lose money than there are to make money; also I've found out that men are not the only gold-brick salesmen. Agnes, I'm what Biff Bates calls a 'Hick'!"

"Look what your father has to say about this last escapade of yours," she said, smiling, and from her desk brought him one of the familiar gray envelopes. This was the letter:

To My Daughter Agnes, Upon Bobby's Entanglement with a Blackmailing Woman

"No man can guard against being roped in by a scheming woman the first time; but if it happens twice he deserves it, and he should be turned out to stay an idiot, for the signs are so plain. A man swindler takes a man's money and makes a fool of him; but a woman swindler takes a man's money and leaves a smirch on him. Only a man's nearest and

dearest can help him live down such a smirch; so, Agnes, if my son has been this particular variety of everlasting blank fool, don't turn against him. He needs you. Moreover, you'll find him improved by it. He'll be so much more humble."

"I didn't really need that letter," Agnes shyly confessed; "but maybe it helped some."

CHAPTER XXII

AGNES FINDS BOBBY A SLING AND BOBBY PUTS A STONE IN IT

THE wonderful change in a girl who, through her love, has become all woman, that was the marvel to Bobby; the breadth of her knowledge, the depth of her sympathy, the boundlessness of her compassionate forgiveness, her quality of motherliness; and this last was perhaps the greatest marvel of all. Yet even his marveling did not encompass all the wonder. In his last exploit, more full of folly than anything into which he had yet blundered, and the one which, of all others, might most have turned her from him, Agnes had had the harder part; to sit at home and wait, to dread she knew not what. The certainty which finally evolved had less of distress in it than not to know while day by day passed by. One thing had made it easier: never for one moment had she lost faith in Bobby, in any way. She was certain, however, that financially his trip would be a losing one, and from the time he left she kept her mind almost constantly upon the thought

of his future. She had become almost desperately anxious for him to fulfill the hopes of his father, and day by day she studied the commercial field as she had never thought it possible that she could do. There was no line of industry upon which she did not ponder, and there was scarcely any morning that she did not at the breakfast table ask Dan Elliston the ins and outs of some business. If he was not able to tell her all she wanted to know, she usually commissioned him to find out. He took these requests in good part, and if she accomplished nothing else by all her inquiries she acquired such a commercial education as falls to the lot of but few home-kept young women.

One morning her uncle came down a trifle late for breakfast and was in a hurry.

"The Elliston School of Commercial Instruction will have a recess for this session," he observed as he popped into his chair. "I have an important engagement at the factory this morning and have about seven minutes for breakfast. During that seven minutes I prefer to eat rather than to talk. However, I do not object to listening. This being my last word except to request you to gather things closely about my plate, you may now start."

"Very well," said she, dimpling as she usually did at any evidence of bruskness on the part of her

Uncle Dan, for from long experience she knew the harmlessness of his bark. "Nick Allstyne happened to remark to me last night that the *Bulletin* is for sale. What do you think of the newspaper business for Bobby?"

"The time necessary to answer that question takes my orange from me," objected Uncle Dan as he hastily sipped another bite of the fruit and pushed it away. "The newspaper business for Bobby!" He drew the muffins toward him and took one upon his plate, then he stopped and pondered a moment. "Do you know," said he, "that's about the best suggestion you've made. I believe he could make a hummer out of a newspaper. I've noticed this about the boy's failures; they have all of them been due to lack of experience; none of them has been due to any absence of backbone. Nobody has ever bluffed him."

Agnes softly clapped her hands.

"Exactly!" she cried. "Well, Uncle Dan, this is the last word *I'm* going to say. For the balance of your seven minutes I'm going to help stuff you with enough food to keep you until luncheon time; but sometime to-day, if you find time, I want you to go over and see the proprietor of the *Bulletin* and find out how much he wants for his property, and investigate it as a business proposition just the same as if you were going into it yourself."

Uncle Dan, dipping voraciously into his soft boiled eggs, grinned and said: "Huh!" Then he looked at his watch. When he came home to dinner, however, he hunted up Agnes at once.

"Your *Bulletin* proposition looks pretty good," he told her. "I saw Greenleaf. He's a physical wreck and has been for two years. He has to get away or die. Moreover, his physical condition has reacted upon his paper. His circulation has run down, but he has a magnificent plant and a good office organization. He wants two hundred thousand dollars for his plant, good will and franchises. I'm going to investigate this a little further. Do you suppose Bobby will have two hundred thousand left when he gets through with grand opera?"

"I hope so," replied Agnes; "but if he hasn't I'll have him waste the balance of this two hundred and fifty thousand so that he can draw the next one."

Uncle Dan laughed in huge enjoyment of this solution.

"You surely were cut out for high finance," he told her.

She smiled, and was silent a while, hesitating.

"You seem to think pretty well of the business as a business proposition," she ventured anxiously, by and by; "but you haven't told me what you think of it as applicable to Bobby."

"If he'll take you in the office with him, he'll do all right," he answered her banteringly; but when he went up-stairs and found his wife he said: "Constance, if that girl don't pull Bobby Burnit through his puppyhood in good shape there is something wrong with the scheme of creation. There is something about you women of the Elliston family that every once in a while makes me pause and reverence the Almighty," whereupon Aunt Constance flushed prettily, as became her.

With the same earnestness of purpose Agnes handled the question of Bobby's breach-of-promise suit in so far as it affected his social reception. The Ellistons went to the theater and sat in a box to exhibit him on the second night after his return, and Agnes took careful count of all the people she knew who attended the theater that night. The next day she went to see all of them, among others Mrs. Horace Wickersham, whose social word was social law.

"My dear," said the redoubtable Mrs. Wickersham, " it does Bobby Burnit great credit that he did not marry the creature. Of course I shall invite him to our affair next Friday night."

After that there could be no further question of Bobby's standing, though without the firm support of Agnes he might possibly have been ostracised, for a time at least.

It was with much less certainty that she spread before Bobby the facts and figures which Uncle Dan had secured about the condition and prospects of the *Bulletin*. She did not urge the project upon him. Instead, though in considerable anxiety, she left the proposition open to his own judgment. He pondered the question more soberly and seriously than he had yet considered anything. There were but two chances left to redeem himself now, and he felt much like a gambler who has been reduced to his last desperate stake. He grew almost haggard over the proposition, and he spent two solid weeks in investigation. He went to Washington to see Jack Starlett, who knew three or four newspaper proprietors in Philadelphia and elsewhere. He obtained introductions to these people and consulted with them, inspected their plants and listened to all they would say; as they liked him, they said much. Ripened considerably by what he had found out he came back home and bought the *Bulletin*. Moreover, he had very definitely made up his mind precisely what to do with it.

On the first morning that he walked into the office of that paper as its sole owner and proprietor, he called the managing editor to him and asked:

"What, heretofore, has been the politics of this paper?"

"Pale yellow jelly," snapped Ben Jolter wrathfully.

"Supposed to be anti-Stone, hasn't it been?" Bobby smilingly inquired.

"But always perfectly ladylike in what it said about him."

"And what are the politics of the employees?"

At this Mr. Jolter snorted.

"They are good newspaper men, Mr. Burnit," he stated in quick defense; "and a good newspaper man has no politics."

Bobby eyed Mr. Jolter with contemplative favor. He was a stout, stockily-built man, with a square head and sparse gray hair that would persist in tangling and curling at the ends; and he perpetually kept his sleeves rolled up over his big arms.

"I don't know anything about this business," confessed Bobby, "but I hope to. First of all, I'd like to find out why the *Bulletin* has no circulation."

"The lack of a spinal column," asserted Jolter. "It has had no policy, stood pat on no proposition, and made no aggressive fight on anything."

"If I understand what you mean by the word," said Bobby slowly, "the *Bulletin* is going to have a policy."

It was now Mr. Jolter's turn to gaze contemplatively at Bobby.

"If you were ten years older I would feel more hopeful about it," he decided bluntly.

The young man flushed uncomfortably. He was keenly aware that he had made an ass of himself in business four successive times, and that Jolter knew it. By way of facing the music, however, he showed to his managing editor a letter, left behind with old Johnson for Bobby by the late John Burnit:

"The mere fact that a man has been foolish four times is no absolute proof that he is a fool; but it's a mighty significant hint. However, Bobby, I'm still betting on you, for by this time you ought to have your fighting blood at the right temperature; and I've seen you play great polo in spite of a cracked rib.

"P. S. If any one else intimates that you are a fool, trounce him one for me."

"If there's anything in heredity you're a lucky young man," said Jolter seriously, as he handed back the letter.

"I think the governor was worried about it himself," admitted Bobby with a smile; "and if he was doubtful I can't blame you for being so. Nevertheless, Mr. Jolter, I must insist that we are going to have a policy," and he quietly outlined it.

Mr. Jolter had been so long a directing voice in the newspaper business that he could not be startled by

anything short of a presidential assassination, and that at press time. Nevertheless, at Bobby's announcement he immediately sought for his pipe and was compelled to go into his own office after it. He came back lighting it and felt better.

"It's suicide!" he declared.

"Then we'll commit suicide," said Bobby pleasantly.

Mr. Jolter, after long, grinning thought, solemnly shook hands with him.

"I'm for it," said he. "Here's hoping that we survive long enough to write our own obituary!"

Mr. Jolter, to whom fighting was as the breath of new-mown hay, and who had long been curbed in that delightful occupation, went back into his own office with a more cheerful air than he had worn for many a day, and issued a few forceful orders, winding up with a direction to the press foreman to prepare for ten thousand extra copies that evening.

When the three o'clock edition of the *Bulletin* came on the street, the entire first page was taken up by a life-size half-tone portrait of Sam Stone, and underneath it was the simple legend:

THIS MAN MUST LEAVE TOWN

The first citizens to awake to the fact that the *Bulletin* was born anew were the newsboys. Those live

and enterprising merchants, with a very keen judgment of comparative values, had long since ceased to call the *Bulletin* at all; half of them had even ceased to carry it. Within two minutes after this edition was out they were clamoring for additional copies, and for the first time in years the alley door of the *Bulletin* was besieged by a seething mob of ragged, diminutive, howling masculinity. Out on the street, however, they were not even now calling the name of the paper. They were holding forth that black first page and screaming just the name of Sam Stone.

Sam Stone! It was a magic name, for Stone had been the boss of the town since years without number; a man who had never held office, but who dictated the filling of all offices; a man who was not ostensibly in any business, but who swayed the fortune of every public enterprise; a self-confessed grafter whom crusade after crusade had failed to dislodge from absolute power. The crowds upon the street snapped eagerly at that huge portrait and searched as eagerly through the paper for more about the Boss. They did not find it, except upon the editorial page, where, in the space usually devoted to drivel about "How Kind We Should Be to Dumb Animals," and "Why Fathers Should Confide More in Their Sons," appeared in black type a paraphrase of the legend on the outside: "*Sam Stone Must Leave Town.*" Be-

neath was the additional information: "Further issues of the *Bulletin* will tell why." Above and below this was nothing but startlingly white blank paper, two solid columns of it up and down the page.

Down in the deep basement of the *Bulletin*, the big three-deck presses, two of which had been standing idle since the last presidential election, were pounding out copies by the thousand, while grimy pressmen, blackened with ink, perspired most happily.

By five o'clock, men and even girls, pouring from their offices, and laborers coming from work, had all heard of it, and on the street the bold defiance created first a gasp and then a smile. Another attempt to dislodge Sam Stone was, in the light of previous efforts, a laughable thing to contemplate; and yet it was interesting.

In the office of the *Bulletin* it was a gleeful occasion. Nonchalant reporters sat down with that amazing front page spread out before them, studied the brutal face of Stone and chuckled cynically. Lean Doc Miller, "assistant city editor," or rather head copy reader, lit one cigarette from the stub of another and observed, to nobody in particular but to everybody in general:

"I can see where we all contribute for a beautiful Gates Ajar floral piece for one Robert Burnit;" whereupon fat "Bugs" Roach, "handling copy" across the table from him, inquired:

"Do you suppose the new boss really has this much nerve, or is he just a damned fool?"

"Stone won't do a thing to *him!*" ingratiatingly observed a "cub" reporter, laying down twelve pages of "copy" about a man who had almost been burglarized.

"Look here, you Greenleaf Whittier Squiggs," said Doc Miller most savagely, not because he had any particular grudge against the unfortunately named G. W., but because of discipline and the custom with "cubs," "the next time you're sent out on a twenty-minute assignment like this, remember the number of the *Bulletin*, 427 Grand Street. The telephone is Central 2051, and don't forget to report the same day. Did you get the man's name? Uh-huh. His address? Uh-huh. Well, we don't want the item."

Slow and phlegmatic Jim Brown, who had been city editor on the *Bulletin* almost since it was the *Bulletin* under half a dozen changes of ownership and nearly a score of managing editors, sauntered over into Jolter's room with a copy of the paper in his hand, and a long black stogie held by some miracle in the corner of his mouth, where it would be quite out of the road of conversation.

"Pretty good stuff," he drawled, indicating the remarkable first page.

"The greatest circus act that was ever pulled off

in the newspaper business," asserted Jolter. "It will quadruple the present circulation of the *Bulletin* in a week."

"Make or break," assented the city editor, "with the odds in favor of the break."

A slenderly-built young man, whose red face needed a shave and whose clothes, though wrinkled and unbrushed, shrieked of quality, came stumbling up the stairs in such hot haste as was possible in his condition, and without ceremony or announcement burst into the room where Bobby Burnit, with that day's issue of the *Bulletin* spread out before him, was trying earnestly to get a professional idea of the proper contents of a newspaper.

"Great goods, old man!" said the stranger. "I want to congratulate you on your lovely nerve," and seizing Bobby's hand he shook it violently.

"Thanks," said Bobby, not quite sure whether to be amused or resentful. "Who are you?"

"I'm Dillingham," announced the red-faced young man with a cheerful smile.

Bobby was about to insist upon further information, when Mr. Jolter came in to introduce Brown, who had not yet met Mr. Burnit.

"Dill," drawled Brown, with a twinkle in his eye, "how much money have you?"

"Money to burn; money in every pocket," asserted

Mr. Dillingham; "money to last for ever," and he jammed both hands in his trousers' pockets.

It was an astonishing surprise to Mr. Dillingham, after groping in those pockets, to find that he brought up only a dollar bill in his left hand and forty-five cents in silver in his right. He was still contemplating in awed silence this perplexing fact when Brown handed him a five-dollar bill.

"Now, you run right out and get stewed to the eyebrows again," directed Brown. "Get properly pickled and have it over with, then show up here in the morning with a headache and get to work. We want you to take charge of the Sam Stone exposé, and in to-morrow's *Bulletin* we want the star introduction of your life."

"Do you mean to say you're going to trust the whole field conduct of this campaign to that chap?" asked Bobby, frowning, when Dillingham had gone.

"This is his third day, so Dill's safe for to-morrow morning," Brown hastened to assure him. "He'll be up here early, so penitent that he'll be incased in a blue fog—and he'll certainly deliver the goods."

Bobby sighed and gave it up. This was a new world.

Over in his dingy little office, up his dingy flight of stairs, Sam Stone sat at his bare and empty old desk, looking contemplatively out of the window, when

Frank Sharpe—his luxuriant gray mustache in an extraordinary and most violent state of straggling curliness—came nervously bustling in with a copy of the *Bulletin* in his hand.

"Have you seen this?" he shrilled.

"Heard about it," grunted Stone.

"But what do you think of it?" demanded Sharpe indignantly, and spread the paper out on the desk before the Boss, thumping it violently with his knuckles.

Stone studied it well, without the slightest change of expression upon his heavy features.

"It's a swell likeness," he quietly conceded, by and by.

CHAPTER XXIII

BOBBY BEGINS TO GIVE TESTIMONY THAT HE IS OLD JOHN BURNIT'S SON

CLOSETED with Jolter and Brown, and mapping out with them the dangerous campaign into which they had plunged, Bobby did not leave the office of the *Bulletin* until six o'clock. At the curb, just as he was about to step into his waiting machine, Biff Bates hailed him with vast enthusiasm.

"Go to it, Bobby!" said he. "I'm backing you across the board, win, place and show; but let me give you a hot tip right from the stables. You want to be afraid to go home in the dark, or Stone's lobbygows will lean on you with a section of plumbing."

"I've thought of that, Biff," laughed Bobby; "and I think I'll organize a band of murderers of my own."

Johnson, whom Bobby had quite forgotten in the stress of the day, joined them at this moment. Thirty years as head bookkeeper and confidential adviser in old John Burnit's merchandise establishment had not fitted lean Johnson for the less dignified and more

flurried work of a newspaper office, even in the business department, and he was looking very much fagged.

"Well, Johnson, what do you think of my first issue of the *Bulletin?*" asked Bobby pleasantly.

Johnson looked genuinely distressed.

"To tell you the truth, Mr. Burnit," said he, "I have not seen it. I never in all my life saw a place where there were so many interruptions to work. If we could only be back in your father's store, sir."

"We'll be back there before we quit," said Bobby confidently; "or I'll be in the incurable ward."

"I hope so, sir," said Johnson dismally, and strode across the street to catch his car; but he came back hastily to add: "I meant about the store; not about the asylum."

Biff Bates laughed as he clambered into the tonneau with Bobby.

"If you'd make a billion dollars, Bobby, but didn't get back your father's business that Silas Trimmer snaked away from you, Johnson would think you'd overlooked the one best bet."

"So would I," said Bobby soberly, and he had but very little more to say until the chauffeur stopped at Bobby's own door, where puffy old Applerod, who had been next to Johnson in his usefulness to old John Burnit, stood nervously awaiting him on the steps.

"Terrible, sir! Terrible!" spluttered Applerod the moment he caught sight of Bobby. "This open defiance of Mr. Stone will put entirely out of existence what little there is left of the Brightlight Electric Company."

"Cheer up, Applerod, for death must come to us all," encouraged Bobby. "Such shreds and fragments of the Brightlight as there are left would have been wiped out anyhow; and frankly, if you must have it, I put you in there as general manager, when I shifted Johnson to the *Bulletin* this morning, because there was nothing to manage."

Applerod threw up his hands in dismay.

"And there will be less. Oh, Mr. Burnit, if your father were only here!"

Bobby, whose suavity Applerod had never before seen ruffled, turned upon him angrily.

"I'm tired hearing about my father, Applerod," he declared. "I revere the governor's memory too much to want to be made angry by the mention of his name. Hereafter, kindly catch the idea, if you can, that I am my own man and must work out my own salvation; and I propose to do it! Biff, you don't mind if I put off seeing you until to-morrow? I have a dinner engagement this evening and very little time to dress."

"His own man," said Applerod sorrowfully when

Bobby had left them. "John Burnit would be half crazy if he could know what a botch his son is making of things. I don't see how a man could let himself be cheated four times in business."

"I can tell you," retorted Biff. "All his old man ever did for him was to stuff his pockets with kale, and let him grow up into the sort of clubs where one sport says: 'I'm going to walk down to the corner.' Says the other sport: 'I'll bet you see more red-headed girls on the way down than you do on the way back.' Says the first sport: 'You're on for a hundred.' He goes down to the corner and he comes back. 'How about the red-headed girls?' asks the second sport. 'I lose,' says the first sport; 'here's your hundred.' Now, when Bobby is left real money, he starts in to play the same open-face game, and when one of these business wolves tells him anything Bobby don't stop to figure whether the mut means what he says, or means something else that sounds like the same thing. Now, if Bobby was a simp they'd sting him in so many places that he'd be swelled all over, like an exhibition cream puff; but he ain't a simp. It took him four times to learn that he can't take a man's word in business. That's all he needed. Bobby's awake now, and more than that he's mad, and if I hear you make another crack that he ain't about all the candy I'll sick old Johnson on you," and with this dire threat Biff

wheeled, leaving Mr. Applerod speechless with red-faced indignation.

It was just a quiet family dinner that Bobby attended that night at the Ellistons', with Uncle Dan and Aunt Constance Elliston at the head and foot of the table, and across from him the smiling face of Agnes. He was so good to look at that Agnes was content just to watch him, but Aunt Constance noted his abstraction and chided him upon it.

"Really, Bobby," said she, "since you have gone into business you're ruined socially."

"Frankly, I don't mind," he replied, smiling. "I'd rather be ruined socially than financially. In spite of certain disagreeable features of it, I have a feeling upon me to-night that I'm going to like the struggle."

"You're starting a stiff one now," observed Uncle Dan dryly. "Beginning an open fight against Sam Stone is a good deal like being suspended over Hades by a single hair—amidst a shower of Roman candles."

"That's putting it about right, I guess," admitted Bobby; "but I'm relying on the fact that the public at heart is decent."

"Do you remember, Bobby, what Commodore Vanderbilt said about the public?" retorted Uncle Dan. "They're decent, all right, but they won't stick together in any aggressive movement short of gunpowder. In the meantime, Stone has more entrench-

ments than even you can dream. For instance, I should not wonder but that within a very short time I shall be forced to try my influence with you in his behalf."

"How?" asked Bobby incredulously.

"Well, I am trying to get a spur track from the X. Y. Z. Railroad to my factory on Spindle Street. The X. Y. Z. is perfectly willing to put in the track, and I'm trying to have the city council grant us a permit. Now, who is the city council?"

"Stone," Bobby was compelled to admit.

"Of course. I have already arranged to pay quite a sum of money to the capable and honest city councilman of that ward. The capable and honest councilman will go to Stone and give up about three-fourths of what I pay him. Then Stone will pass the word out to the other councilmen that he's for Alderman Hold-up's spur track permit, and I get it. Very simple arrangement, and satisfactory, but, if they do not shove that measure through at their meeting to-morrow night, before Stone finds out any possible connection between you and me, the price of it will not be money. I'll be sent to you."

"I see," said Bobby in dismay. "In other words, it will be put flatly up to me; I'll either have to quit my attacks on Stone, or be directly responsible for your losing your valuable spur track."

"Exactly," said Uncle Dan.

Bobby drew a long breath.

"I'm very much afraid, Mr. Elliston, that you will have to do without your spur."

Uncle Dan's eyes twinkled.

"I'm willing," said he. "I have a good offer to sell that branch of my plant anyhow, and I think I'll dispose of it. I have been very frank with you about this, so that you will know exactly what to expect when other people come at you. You will be beset as you never were before."

"I have been looking for an injunction, myself."

"You will have no injunction, for Stone scarcely dares go publicly into his own courts," said Uncle Dan, with a pretty thorough knowledge, gained through experience, of the methods of the "Stone gang"; "though he might even use that as a last resort. That will be after intimidation fails, for it is quite seriously probable that they will hire somebody to beat you into insensibility. If that don't teach you the proper lesson, they will probably kill you."

Agnes looked up apprehensively, but catching Bobby's smile took this latter phase of the matter as a joke. Bobby himself was not deeply impressed with it, but before he went away that night Uncle Dan took him aside and urged upon him the seriousness of the matter.

"I'll fight them with their own weapons, then," de-

clared Bobby. "I'll organize a counter band of thugs, and I'll block every move they make with one of the same sort. Somehow or other I think I am going to win."

"Of course you will win," said Agnes confidently, overhearing this last phrase; and with that most prized of all encouragement, the faith in his prowess of *the* one woman, Bobby, for that night at least, felt quite contemptuous of the grilling fight to come.

His second issue of the *Bulletin* contained on the front page a three-column picture of Sam Stone, with the same caption, together with a full-page article, written by Dillingham from data secured by himself and the others who were put upon the "story." This set forth the main iniquities of Sam Stone and his crew of municipal grafters. In the third day's issue the picture was reduced to two columns, occupying the left-hand upper corner of the front page, where Bobby ordered it to remain permanently as the slogan of the *Bulletin;* and now Dillingham began his long series of articles, taking up point by point the ramifications of Stone's machine, and coming closer and closer daily to people who would much rather have been left entirely out of the picture.

It was upon this third day that Bobby, becoming apprehensive merely because nothing had happened, received a visit from Frank Sharpe. Mr. Sharpe was

as nattily dressed as ever, and presented himself as pleasantly as a summer breeze across fields of clover.

"I came in to see you about merging the Brightlight Electric Company with the Consolidated, Mr. Burnit," said Mr. Sharpe in a chatty tone, laying his hat, cane and gloves upon Bobby's desk and seating himself comfortably.

From his face there was no doubt in Mr. Sharpe's mind that this was a mere matter of an interview with a satisfactory termination, for Mr. Sharpe had done business with Bobby before; but something had happened to Bobby in the meantime.

"When I get ready for a merger of the Brightlight with the Consolidated I'll tell you about it; and also I'll tell you the terms," Bobby advised him with a snap, and for the first time Mr. Sharpe noted what a good jaw Bobby had.

"I should think," hesitated Sharpe, "that in the present condition of the Brightlight almost any terms would be attractive to you. You have no private consumers now, and your contract for city lighting, which you can not evade except by bankruptcy, is losing you money."

"If that were news to me it would be quite startling," responded Bobby, "but you see, Mr. Sharpe, I am quite well acquainted with the facts myself. Also, I have a strong suspicion that you tampered

with my plant; that your hired agents cut my wires, ruined my dynamos and destroyed the efficiency of my service generally."

"You will find it very difficult to prove that, Mr. Burnit," said Sharpe, with a sternness which could not quite conceal a lurking smile.

"I'm beginning to like difficulty," retorted Bobby. "I do not mind telling you that I was never angry before in my life, and I'm surprised to find myself enjoying the sensation."

Bobby was still more astonished to find himself laying his fist tensely upon his desk. The lurking smile was now gone entirely from Mr. Sharpe's face.

"I must admit, Mr. Burnit, that your affairs have turned out rather unfortunately," he said, "but I think that they might be remedied for you a bit, perhaps. Suppose you go and see Stone."

"I do not care to see Mr. Stone," said Bobby.

"But he wants to see you," persisted Sharpe. "In fact, he told me so this morning. I'm quite sure you would find it to your advantage to drop over there."

"I shall never enter Mr. Stone's office until he has vacated it for good," said Bobby; "then I might be induced to come over and break up the furniture. If Stone wants to see me I'm keeping fairly regular office hours here."

"It is not Mr. Stone's habit to go to other people,"

bluffed Sharpe, growing somewhat nervous; for it was one of Stone's traits not to forgive the failure of a mission. He had no use for extenuating circumstances. He never looked at anything in this world but results.

Bobby took down the receiver of his house telephone.

"I'd like to speak to Mr. Jolter, please," said he.

Sharpe rose to go.

"Just wait a moment, Mr. Sharpe," said Bobby peremptorily, and Sharpe stopped. "Jolter," he directed crisply, turning again to the 'phone, "kindly step into my office, will you?"

A moment later, while Sharpe stood wondering, Jolter came in, and grinned as he noted Bobby's visitor.

"Mr. Jolter," asked Bobby, "have we a good portrait of Mr. Sharpe?"

Jolter, still grinning, stated that they had.

"Have a three-column half-tone made of it for this evening's *Bulletin*."

Sharpe fairly spluttered.

"Mr. Burnit, if you print my picture in the *Bulletin* connected with anything derogatory, I'll—I'll—"

Bobby waited politely for a moment.

"Go ahead, Mr. Sharpe," said he. "I'm interested to know just what you will do, because we're going to

print the picture, connected with something quite derogatory. Now finish your threat."

Sharpe gazed at him a moment, speechless with rage, and then stamped from the office.

Jolter, quietly chuckling, turned to Bobby.

"I guess you'll do," he commented. "If you last long enough you'll win."

"Thanks," said Bobby dryly, and then he smiled. "Say, Jolter," he added, "it's bully fun being angry. I'm just beginning to realize what I have been missing all these years. Go ahead with Sharpe's picture and print anything you please about him. I guess you can secure enough material without going out of the office, and if you can't I'll supply you with some."

Jolter looked at his watch and hurried for the door. Minutes were precious if he wanted to get that Sharpe cut made in time for the afternoon edition. At the door, however, he turned a bit anxiously.

"I suppose you carry a gun, don't you?"

"By no means," said Bobby. "Never owned one."

"I'd advise you to get a good one at once," and Jolter hurried away.

That evening's edition of the *Bulletin* contained a beautiful half-tone of Mr. Sharpe. Above it was printed: "The *Bulletin's* Rogues' Gallery," and beneath was the caption: "Hadn't this man better go, too?"

CHAPTER XXIV

EDITOR BURNIT DISCOVERS THAT HE IS FIGHTING AN ENTIRE CITY INSTEAD OF ONE MAN

AT four o'clock of that same day Mr. Brown came in, and Mr. Brown was grinning. In the last three days a grin had become the trade-mark of the office, for the staff of the *Bulletin* was enjoying itself as never before in all its history.

"Stone's in my office," said Brown. "Wants to see you."

Bobby was interestedly leafing over the pages of the *Bulletin*. He looked leisurely at his watch and yawned.

"Tell Mr. Stone that I am busy, but that I will receive him in fifteen minutes," he directed, whereupon Mr. Brown, appreciating the joke, grinned still more expansively and withdrew.

Bobby, as calmly as he could, went on with his perusal of the *Bulletin*. To deny that he was somewhat tense over the coming interview would be foolish. Never had a quarter of an hour dragged so slowly,

but he waited it out, with five minutes more on top of it, and then he telephoned to Brown to know if Stone was still there. He was relieved to find that he was.

"Tell him to come in," he ordered.

If Stone was inwardly fuming when he entered the room he gave no indication of it. His heavy face bore only his habitually sullen expression, his heavy-lidded eyes bore only their usual somberness, his heavy brow had in it no crease other than those that time had graven there. With the deliberateness peculiar to him he planted his heavy body in a big arm-chair opposite to Bobby, without removing his hat.

"I don't believe in beating around the bush, Mr. Burnit," said he, with a glance over his shoulder to make sure that the door was closed. "Of course you're after something. What do you want?"

Bobby looked at him in wonder. He had heard much of Stone's bluntness, and now he was fascinated by it. Nevertheless, he did not forget his own viewpoint.

"Oh, I don't want much," he observed pleasantly, "only just your scalp; yours and the scalps of a few others who gave me my education, from Silas Trimmer up and down. I think one of the things that aggravated me most was the recent elevation of Trimmer to the chairmanship of your waterworks commission. Trivial as it was, this probably had as much to do with my sudden determination to wipe you out, as

your having the Brightlight's poles removed from Market Street."

Stone laid a heavy hand easily upon Bobby's desk. It was a strong hand, a big hand, brown and hairy, and from the third pudgy finger glowed a huge diamond.

"As far as Trimmer is concerned," said he, quite undisturbed, "you can have his head any minute. He's a mutt."

"You don't need to give me Mr. Trimmer's head," replied Bobby, quite as calmly. "I intend to get that myself."

"And as for the Brightlight," continued Stone as if he had not been interrupted, "I sent Sharpe over to see you about that this morning. I think we can fix it so that you can get back your two hundred and fifty thousand. The deal's been worth a lot more than that to the Consolidated."

"No doubt," agreed Bobby. "However, I'm not looking, at the present moment, for a sop to the Brightlight Company. It will be time enough for that when I have forced the Consolidated into the hands of a receiver."

Stone looked at Bobby thoughtfully between narrowed eyelids.

"Look here, young fellow," said he presently. "Now, you take it from me, and I have been through

the mill, that there ain't any use holding a grouch. The mere doing damage don't get you anything unless it's to whip somebody else into line with a warning. I take it that this ain't what you're trying to do. You think you're simply playing a grouch game, table stakes; but if you'll simmer down you'll find you've got a price. Now, I'd rather have you with me than against me. If you'll just say what you want I'll get it for you if it's in reach. But don't froth. I've cleaned up as much money as your daddy did, just by keeping my temper."

"I'm going to keep mine, too," Bobby informed him quite cheerfully. "I have just found that I have one, and I like it."

Stone brushed this triviality aside with a wave of his heavy hand.

"Quit kidding," he said, "and come out with it. I see you're no piker, anyhow. You're playing for big game. What is it you want?"

"As I said before, not very much," declared Bobby. "I only want to grind your machine into powder. I want to dig up the rotten municipal control of this city, root and branch. I want to ferret out every bit of crookedness in which you have been concerned, and every bit that you have caused. I want to uncover every man, high or low, for just what he is, and I don't care how well protected he is nor how shining

his reputation, if he's concerned in a crooked deal I'm going after him—"

"There won't be many of us left," Stone interrupted with a smile.

"—I want to get back some of the money you have stolen from this city," continued Bobby; "and I want, last of all, to drive you out of this town for good."

Stone rose with a sigh.

"This is the only chance I'll give you to climb in with the music," he rumbled. "I've kept off three days, figuring out where you were leading to and what you were after. Now, last of all, what will you take to call it off?"

"I have told you the price," said Bobby.

"Then you're looking for trouble and you must have it, eh?"

"I suppose I must."

"Then you'll get it," and without the sign of a frown upon his brow Mr. Stone left the office.

The next morning things began to happen. The First National Bank called up the business office of the *Bulletin* and ordered its advertisement discontinued. Not content alone with that, President De Graff called up Bobby personally, and in a very cold and dignified voice told him that the First National was compelled to withdraw its patronage on account of the undignified personal attacks in which the *Bulletin* was

indulging. Bobby whistled softly. He knew De Graff quite well; they were, in fact, upon most intimate terms, socially.

"I should think, De Graff," Bobby remonstrated, "that of all people the banks should be glad to have all this crookedness rooted out of the city. As a matter of fact, I intended shortly to ask your coöperation in the formation of a citizens' committee to insure honest politics."

"I really could not take any active part in such a movement, Mr. Burnit," returned De Graff, still more coldly. "The conservatism necessary to my position forbids my connection with any sensational publicity whatsoever."

An hour later, Crone, the advertising manager, came up to Bobby very much worried, to report that not only the First National but the Second Market Bank had stopped their advertising, as had Trimmer and Company, and another of the leading dry-goods firms.

"Of course," said Crone, "your editorial policy is your own, but I'm afraid that it is going to be ruinous to your advertising."

"I shouldn't wonder," admitted Bobby dryly, and that was all the satisfaction he gave Crone; but inwardly he was somewhat disturbed.

He had not thought of the potency of this line of

attack. While he knew nothing of the newspaper business, he had already made sure that the profit was in the advertising. He sent for Jolter.

"Ben," he asked, "what is the connection between the First National and the Second Market Banks and Sam Stone?"

"Money," said the managing editor promptly. "Both banks are depositories of city funds."

"I see," said Bobby slowly. "Do any other banks enjoy this patronage?"

"The Merchants' and the Planters' and Traders' hold the county funds, which are equally at Stone's disposal."

Bobby heard this news in silence, and Jolter, after looking at him narrowly for a moment, added:

"I'll tell you something else. Not one of the four banks pays to the city or the county one penny of interest on these deposits. This is well known to the newspapers, but none of them has dared use it."

"Go after them," said Bobby.

"Moreover, it is strongly suspected that the banks pay interest privately to Stone, through a small and select ring in the court-house and in the city hall."

"Go after them."

"I suppose you know the men who will be involved in this," said Jolter.

"Some of my best friends, I expect," said Bobby.

"And some of the most influential citizens in this town," retorted Jolter. "They can ruin the *Bulletin* They could ruin any business."

"The thing's crooked, isn't it?" demanded Bobby.

"As a dog's hind leg."

"Go after them, Jolter!" Bobby reiterated. Then he laughed aloud. "De Graff just telephoned me that 'the conservatism of his position forbids him to take part in any sensational publicity whatsoever.' "

Comment other than a chuckle was superfluous from either one of them, and Jolter departed to the city editor's room, to bring joy to the heart of the staff.

It was "Bugs" Roach who scented the far-reaching odor of this move with the greatest joy.

"You know what this means, don't you?" he delightedly commented. "A grand jury investigation. Oh, listen to the band!"

Before noon the Merchants' and the Planters' and Traders' Banks had withdrawn their advertisements.

At about the same hour a particularly atrocious murder was committed in one of the suburbs. Up in the reporters' room of the police station, Thomas, of the *Bulletin*, and Graham, of the *Chronicle*, were indulging in a quiet game of whist with two of the morning newspaper boys, when a roundsman stepped to the door and called Graham out. Graham came back a moment later after his coat, with such studied non-

chalance that the other boys, eternally suspicious as police reporters grow to be, looked at him narrowly, and Thomas asked him, also with studied nonchalance:

"The candy-store girl, or the one in the laundry office?"

"Business, young fellow, business," returned Graham loftily. "I guess the *Chronicle* knows when it has a good man. I'm called into the office to save the paper. They're sending a cub down to cover the afternoon. Don't scoop him, old man."

"Not unless I get a chance," promised Thomas, but after Graham had gone he went down to the desk and, still unsatisfied, asked:

"Anything doing, Lieut.?"

"Dead as a door-nail," replied the lieutenant, and Thomas, still with an instinct that something was wrong, still sensitive to a certain suppressed tingling excitement about the very atmosphere of the place, went slowly back to the reporters' room, where he spent a worried half-hour.

The noonday edition of the *Chronicle* carried, in the identical columns devoted in the *Bulletin* to a further attack on Stone, a lurid account of the big murder; and the *Bulletin* had not a line of it! A sharp call from Brown to Thomas, at central police, apprised the latter that he had been "scooped," and brought out the facts in the case. Thomas hurried

down-stairs and bitterly upbraided Lieutenant Casper.

"Look here, you Thomas," snapped Casper; "you *Bulletin* guys have been too fresh around here for a long time."

In Casper's eyes—Casper with whom he had always been on cordial joking terms—he saw cruel implacability, and, furious, he knew himself to be "in" for that most wearing of all newspaper jobs—"doing police" for a paper that was "in bad" with the administration. He needed no one to tell him the cause. At three-thirty, Thomas, and Camden, who was doing the city hall, and Greenleaf Whittier Squiggs, who was subing for the day on the courts, appeared before Jim Brown in an agonized body. Thomas had been scooped on the big murder, Camden and G. W. Squiggs had been scooped, at the city hall and the county building, on the only items worth while, and they were all at white heat; though it was a great consolation to Squiggs, after all, to find himself in such distinguished company.

Brown heard them in silence, and with great solemnity conducted them across the hall to Jolter, who also heard them in silence and conducted them into the adjoining room to Bobby. Here Jolter stood back and eyed young Mr. Burnit with great interest as his two experienced veterans and his ambitious

youngster poured forth their several tales of woe. Bobby, as it became him to be, was much disturbed.

"How's the circulation of the *Bulletin?*" he asked of Jolter.

"Five times what it ever was in its history," responded Jolter.

"Do you suppose we can hold it?"

"Possibly."

"How much does a scoop amount to?"

"Well," confessed Jolter, with his eyes twinkling, "I hate to tell you before the boys, but my own opinion is that we know it and the *Chronicle* knows it and Stone knows it, but day after to-morrow the public couldn't tell you on its sacred oath whether it read the first account of the murder in the *Bulletin* or in the *Chronicle*."

Bobby heaved a sigh of relief.

"I always had the impression that a 'beat' meant the death, cortège and cremation of the newspaper that fell behind in the race," he smiled. "Boys, I'm afraid you'll have to stand it for a while. Do the best you can and get beaten as little as possible. By the way, Jolter, I want to see you a minute," and the mournful delegation of three, no whit less mournful because they had been assured that they would not be held accountable for being scooped, filed out.

"What's the connection," demanded Bobby, the

minute they were alone, "between the police department and Sam Stone?"

"Money!" replied Jolter. "Chief of Police Cooley is in reality chief collector. The police graft is one of the richest Stone has. The rake-off from saloons that are supposed to close at one and from crooked gambling joints and illegal resorts of various kinds, amounts, I suppose, to not less than ten to fifteen thousand dollars a week. Of course, the patrolmen get some, but the bulk of it goes to Cooley, who was appointed by Stone, and the biggest slice of all goes to the Boss."

"Go after Cooley," said Bobby. Then suddenly he struck his fist upon the desk. "Great Heavens, man!" he exclaimed. "At the end of every avenue and street and alley that I turn down with the *Bulletin* I find an open sewer."

"The town is pretty well supplied," admitted Jolter. "How do you feel now about your policy?"

"Pretty well staggered," confessed Bobby; "but we're going through with the thing just the same."

"It's a man's-size job," declared Jolter; "but if you get away with it the *Bulletin* will be the best-paying piece of newspaper property west of New York."

"Not the way the advertising's going," said Bobby, shaking his head and consulting a list on his desk.

"Where has Stone a hold on the dry-goods firm of Rolands and Crawford?"

"They built out circular show-windows, all around their big block, and these extend illegally upon two feet of the sidewalk."

"And how about the Ebony Jewel Coal Company?"

"They have been practically allowed to close up Second Street, from Water to Canal, for a dump."

Bobby sighed hopelessly.

"We can't fight everybody in town," he complained.

"Yes, but we can!" exclaimed Jolter with a sudden fire that surprised Bobby, since it was the first the managing editor displayed. "Don't weaken, Burnit! I'm with you in this thing, heart and soul! If we can hold out until next election we will sweep everything before us."

"We will hold out!" declared Bobby.

"I am so sure of it that I'll stand treat," assented Mr. Jolter with vast enthusiasm, and over an old oak table, in a quiet place, Mr. Jolter and Mr. Burnit, having found the sand in each other's craws, cemented a pretty strong liking.

CHAPTER XXV

AN EXCITING GAME OF TIT FOR TAT WITH HIRED THUGS

THE *Bulletin*, continuing its warfare upon Stone and every one who supported him, hit upon names that had never before been mentioned but in terms of the highest respect, and divers and sundry complacent gentlemen who attended church quite regularly began to look for a cyclone cellar. They were compromised with Stone and they could not placate Bobby. The four banks that had withdrawn their advertisements, after a hasty conference with Stone put them back again the first day their names were mentioned. The business department of the *Bulletin* cheerfully accepted those advertisements at the increased rate justified by the *Bulletin's* increased circulation; but the editorial department just as cheerfully kept castigating the erring conservators of the public money, and the advertisements disappeared again.

Bobby's days now were beset from a hundred quarters with agonized appeals to change his policy.

This man and that man and the other man high in commercial and social and political circles came to him with all sorts of pressure, and even Payne Winthrop and Nick Allstyne, two of his particular cronies of the Idlers', not being able to catch him at the club any more, came up to his office.

"This won't do, old man," protested Payne; "we're missing you at billiards and bridge whist, but your refusal to take part in the coming polo tourney was the last straw. You're getting to be a regular plebe."

"I am a plebe," admitted Bobby. "What's the use to deny it? My father was a plebe. He came off the farm with no earthly possessions more valuable than the patches on his trousers. I am one generation from the soil, and since I have turned over a furrow or two, just plain earth smells good to me."

Both of Bobby's friends laughed. They liked him too well to take him seriously in this.

"But really," said Nick, returning to the attack, "the boys at the club were talking over the thing and think this rather bad form, this sort of a fight you're making. You're bound to become involved in a nasty controversy."

"Yes?" inquired Bobby pleasantly. "Watch me become worse involved. More than that, I think I shall come down to the Idlers', when I get things straightened out here, organize a club league and

make you fellows march with banners and torchlights."

This being a more hilarious joke than the other the boys laughed quite politely, though Payne Winthrop grew immediately serious again.

"But we can't lose you, Bobby," he insisted. "We want you to quit this sort of business and come back again to the old crowd. There are so few of us left, you know, that we're getting lonesome. Stan Rogers is getting up a glorious hunt and he wants us all to come up to his lodge for a month at least. You should be tired of this by now, anyhow."

"Not a bit of it," declared Bobby.

"Oh, of course, you have your money involved," admitted Payne, "and you must play it through on that account; but I'll tell you: if you do want to sell I know where I could find a buyer for you at a profit."

Bobby turned on him like a flash.

"Look here, Payne," said he. "Where is your interest in this?"

"My interest?" repeated Payne blankly.

"Yes, your interest. What have you to gain by having me sell out?"

"Why, really, Bobby—" began Payne, thinking to temporize.

"You're here for that purpose, and must tell me

why," insisted Bobby sternly, tapping his finger on the desk.

"Well, if you must know," stammered Payne, taken out of himself by sheer force of Bobby's manner, "my respected and revered—"

"I see," said Bobby.

"The—the pater is thinking of entering politics next year, and he rather wants an organ."

"And Nick, where's yours?"

"Well," confessed Nick, with no more force of reservation than had Payne when mastery was used upon him, "mother's city property and mine, you know, contains some rather tumbledown buildings that are really good for a number of years yet, but which adverse municipal government might—might depreciate in value."

"Just a minute," said Bobby, and he sent for Jolter.

"Ben," he asked, "do you know anything about Mr. Adam Winthrop's political aspirations?"

"I understand he's being groomed for governor," said Jolter.

"Meet his son, Mr. Jolter—Mr. Payne Winthrop. Also Mr. Nick Allstyne. I suppose Mr. Winthrop is to run on Stone's ticket?" continued Bobby, breaking in upon the formalities as quickly as possible.

"Certainly."

"Payne," said Bobby, "if your father wants to talk with me about the *Bulletin* he must come himself. Jolter, do you know where the Allstyne properties are?"

Jolter looked at Nick and Nick colored.

"That's rather a blunt question, under the circumstances, Mr. Burnit," said Jolter, "but I don't see why it shouldn't be answered as bluntly. It's a row of two blocks on the most notorious street of the town, frame shacks that are likely to be the start of a holocaust, any windy night, which will sweep the entire down-town district. They should have been condemned years ago."

"Nick," said Bobby, "I'll give you one month to dispose of that property, because after that length of time I'm going after it."

This was but a sample. Bobby had at last become suspicious, and as old John Burnit had shrewdly observed in one of his letters: "It hurts to acquire suspiciousness, but it is quite necessary; only don't overdo it."

Bobby, however, was in a field where suspiciousness could scarcely be overdone. When any man came to protest or to use influence on Bobby in his fight, Bobby took the bull by the horns, called for Jolter, who was a mine of information upon local affairs, and promptly found out the reason for that man's inter-

est; whereupon he either warned him off or attacked him, and made an average of ten good, healthy enemies a day. He scared Adam Winthrop out of the political race entirely, he made the Allstynes tear down their fire-traps and erect better-paying and consequently more desirable tenements, and he had De Graff and the other involved bankers "staggering in circles and hoarsely barking," as "Bugs" Roach put it.

So far, Bobby had been subjected to no personal annoyances, but on the day after his first attack on the chief of police he began to be arrested for breaking the speed laws, and fined the limit, even though he drove his car but eight miles an hour, while his news carriers and his employees were "pinched" upon the most trivial pretexts. Libel suits were brought wherever a merchant or an official had a record clear enough to risk such procedure, and three of these suits were decided against him; whereupon Bobby, finding the money chain which bound certain of the judges to Sam Stone, promptly attacked these members of the judiciary and appealed his cases.

His very name became a red rag to every member of Stone's crowd; but up to this point no violence had been offered him. One night, however, as he was driving his own car homeward, men on the watch for him stepped out of an alley mouth two blocks above the

Burnit residence and strewed the street thickly with sharp-pointed coil springs. One of these caught a tire, and Bobby, always on the alert for the first sign of such accidents, brought his car to a sudden stop, reached down for his tire-wrench and jumped out. Just as he stooped over to examine the tire, some instinct warned him, and he turned quickly to find three men coming upon him from the alley, the nearest one with an uplifted slung-shot. It was with just a glance from the corner of his eye as he turned that Bobby caught the import of the figure towering above him, and then his fine athletic training came in good stead. With a sidewise spring he was out of the sphere of that descending blow, and, swinging with his heavy wrench, caught the fellow a smash upon the temple which laid him unconscious. Before the two other men had time to think, he was upon them and gave one a broken shoulder-blade. The other escaped. There had been no word from any of the three men which might lead to an explanation of this attack, but Bobby needed no explanation; he divined at once the source from which it came, and in the morning he sent for Biff Bates.

"Biff," said he, "I spoke once about securing some thugs to act as a counter-irritant against Stone, but I have neglected it. How long will it take to get hold of some?"

"Ten minutes, if I wait till dark," replied Biff. "I can go down to the Blue Star, and for ten iron men apiece can get you as fine a bunch of yeggs as ever beat out a cripple's brains with his own wooden leg."

Bobby smiled.

"I don't want them to go quite that far," he objected. "Are they men you can depend upon not to sell out to Stone?"

"Just one way," replied Biff. "The choice line of murderers that hang out down around the levee are half of them sore on Stone, anyhow; but they're afraid of him, and the only way you can use them is to give 'em enough to get 'em out of town. For ten a throw you can buy them body and soul."

"I'll take about four, to start on duty to-night, and stay on duty till they accomplish what I want done," and Bobby detailed his plan to Biff.

Stone had one peculiarity. Knowing that he had enemies, and those among the most reckless class in the world, he seldom allowed himself to be caught alone; but every night he held counsel with some of his followers at a certain respectable beer-garden where, in the summer-time, a long table in a quiet, half-screened corner was reserved for him and his followers, and in the winter a back room was given up for the same purpose. Here Stone transacted all the real business of his local organization, drinking

beer, receiving strange-looking callers, and confining his own remarks to a grunted yes or no, or a brief direction. Every night at about nine-thirty he rose, yawned, and, unattended, walked back through the beer-garden to the alley, where he stood for some five minutes. This was his retreat for uninterrupted thought, and when he came back from it he had the day's developments summed up and the necessary course of action resolved upon.

On the second night after the attempted assault upon Bobby he had no sooner closed the alley door behind him than a man sprang upon him from either side, a heavy hand was placed over his mouth, and he was dragged to the ground, where a third brawny thug straddled his chest and showed him a long knife.

"See it?" demanded the man as he passed the blade before Stone's eyes. "It's hungry. You let 'em clip my brother in stir for a three-stretch when you could have saved him with a grunt, and if I wasn't workin' under orders, in half an hour they'd have you on slab six with ice packed around you and a sheet over you. But we're under orders. We're part of the reform committee, we are," and all three of them laughed silently, "and there's a string of us longer than the Christmas bread-line, all crazy for a piece of this get-away coin. And here's the little message I got to

give you. This time you're to go free. Next time you're to have your head beat off. This thuggin' of peaceable citizens has got to be stopped; see?"

A low whistle from a man stationed at the mouth of the alley interrupted the speech which the man with the knife was enjoying so much, and he sprang from the chest of Stone, who had been struggling vainly all this time. As the man sprang up and started to run, he suddenly whirled and gave Stone a vicious kick upon the hip, and as Stone rose, another man kicked him in the ribs. All three of them ran, and Stone, scrambling to his feet with difficulty, whipped his revolver from his pocket and snapped it. Long disused, however, the trigger stuck, but he took after them on foot in spite of the pain of the two fearful kicks that he had received. Instead of darting straight out of the alley, the men turned in at a small gate at the side of a narrow building on the corner, and slammed the gate behind them. He could hear the drop of the wooden bolt. He knew perfectly that entrance. It was to the littered back yard of a cheap saloon, at the side of which ran a narrow passageway to the street beyond, where street-cars passed every half-minute.

Just as he came furiously up to the gate a policeman darted in at the alley mouth, and, catching the glint of Stone's revolver, whipped his own. He

ran quite fearlessly to Stone, and with a dextrous blow upon the wrist sent the revolver spinning.

"You're under arrest," said he.

For just one second he covered his man, then his arm dropped and his jaw opened in astonishment.

"Why, it's Stone!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, damn you, it's Stone!" screamed the Boss, livid with fury, and overcome with anger he dealt the policeman a staggering blow in the face. "You damned flat-foot, I'll teach you to notice who you put your hands on! Give me that badge!"

White-faced and with trembling fingers, and with a trickle of blood starting slowly from a cut upon his cheek, the man unfastened his badge.

"Now, go back to Cooley and tell him I broke you," Stone ordered, and turned on his heel.

By the time he reached the back door of the beer-garden he was limping most painfully, but when he rejoined his crowd he said nothing of the incident. In the brief time that it had taken him to go from the alley mouth to that table he had divined the significance of the whole thing. For the first time in his career he knew himself to be a systematically marked man, as he had systematically marked others; and he was not beyond reason. Thereafter, Bobby Burnit was in no more jeopardy from hired thugs, and for a solid year he kept up his fight, with plenty

of material to last him for still another twelvemonth. It was a year which improved him in many ways, but Aunt Constance Elliston objected to the improvement.

"Bobby, they *are* spoiling you," she complained. "They're taking your suavity away from you, and you're acquiring grim, hard lines around your mouth."

"They're making him," declared Agnes, looking fondly across at the firm face and into the clear, unwavering eyes.

Bobby answered the look of Agnes with one that needed no words to interpret, and laughed at Aunt Constance.

"I suppose they are spoiling me," he confessed, "and I'm glad of it. I'm glad, above all, that I'm losing the sort of suavity which led me to smile and tell a man politely to take it, when he reached his hand into my pocket for my money."

"You'll do," agreed Uncle Dan. "When you took hold of the *Bulletin*, your best friends only gave you two months. But are you making any money?"

Bobby's face clouded.

"Spending it like water. We have practically no advertising, and a larger circulation than I want. We lose money on every copy of the paper that we sell."

Uncle Dan shook his head.

"Is there a chance that you will ever get it back?" he asked.

"Bobby's so used to failure that he doesn't mind," interjected Aunt Constance.

"Mind!" exclaimed Bobby. "I never minded it so much in my life as I do now. The *Bulletin* must win. I'm bound that it shall win! If we come out ahead in our fight against Stone I'll get all my advertising back, and I'll keep my circulation, which makes advertising rates."

The telephone bell rang in the study adjoining the dining-room, and Bobby, who had been more or less distrait all evening, half rose from his chair. In a moment more the maid informed them that the call was for Mr. Burnit. In the study they could hear his voice, excited and exultant. He returned as delighted as a school-boy.

"Now I can tell you something," he announced. "Within five minutes the *Bulletin* will have exclusive extras on the street, announcing that the legislature has just appointed a committee to investigate municipal affairs throughout the state. That means this town. I have spent ten thousand dollars in lobbying that measure through, and charged it all to 'improvements' on the *Bulletin*. Sounds like I had joined the ranks of the 'boodlers,' don't it? Well, I don't give a cooky for ethics so long as I know I'm right. I'd

have been a simp, as Biff Bates calls it, to go among that crowd of hungry law jugglers with kind words and the ten commandments. I'm not using cross-bows against cannon, and as a result I'm winning. I got my measure through, and now I think we'll put Stone and his crew of freebooters on the grill, with some extra-hot coals for my friend De Graff and the other saintly sinners who have been playing into Stone's hands. I have been working a year for this, and the entire politics of this town, with wide-reaching results in the state, is disrupted."

"You selfish boy," chided Aunt Constance. "You have been here with us for more than an hour, expecting this all the time, and have not breathed one word of it to us. Don't you trust anybody any more?"

"Oh, yes," replied Bobby easily; "but only when it is necessary."

Agnes smiled across at him in calm content. She had but very little to say now. She was in that blissful happiness that comes to any woman when the man most in her mind is reaping his meed of success from a long and hard-fought battle.

"Spoken like your father, Bobby," laughed Uncle Dan. "You're coming to look more and more like him every day. You talk like him and act like him. You have the same snap of your jaws. Your father, how-

ever, never dabbled in politics. He always despised it, and I see you're bound to be knee-deep in it."

"My father would have succeeded in politics," said Bobby confidently, "as he succeeded in everything else, after he once got started. I have his confession in writing, however, that he made a few fool mistakes himself along at first. As for politics, I *am* in it knee-deep, and I'm going to elect my own slate next fall."

"Another reform party, of course," suggested Uncle Dan with a smile.

"Not for Bobby," replied that decided young gentleman. "I am forming an affiliation with Cal Lewis."

"Cal Lewis!" exclaimed Uncle Dan aghast. Then he closed his eyes and laughed softly. "As notorious in his way as Sam Stone himself. Why, Bobby, that's fighting fire with gasolene."

"It's setting a thief to catch a thief. You must remember that for fifteen years Cal hasn't had any of the pie except in a minor way, and all this time he's been fighting Stone tooth and toe-nail. The late reform movement, which failed so lamentably to carry out its gaudy promises after it had won, left him entirely out of its calculations, and Lewis actually joined with Stone in overturning it. I propose to use Lewis' knowledge of political machinery, but in my own way. As a matter of fact, I have already en-

gaged him and put him on salary; a good, stiff one, too. His business is to organize my political machine. I'm going to have a slate of clean men, who will not only conduct the business of this county and city with probity but with discretion, and I do not mind telling you that my candidate for mayor is Chalmers."

Agnes gave a little cry of delight, and even Aunt Constance clapped her hands lightly, for Chalmers, a young lawyer of excellent social connections, was a prime favorite with the Ellistons, and in the business he had transacted for the Burnit estate Bobby had found in him sterling qualities.

"Chalmers is a good man," agreed Uncle Dan, "though he is young, and practically without political influence; but, if you can make him mayor, I predict a brilliant political future for him."

"He will have it," said Bobby confidently, "for I intend to make him the attorney for the investigating committee, and through his work I expect to have not less than a hundred thousand dollars of stolen money turned back into the city and county treasuries."

As Bobby announced this he rose mechanically, and, still absorbed in the details of his big fight, walked out into the hall. It was not until he had his coat on and his hat in his hand that he came to himself; and with the deepest confusion found that he had

been about to walk out without making any adieus whatever.

"Why, where are you going?" inquired Agnes, as he came back into the drawing-room.

He laughed sheepishly.

"Why," he explained, "ever since I received that telephone message I have been seeing before me the *Bulletin* extra that they are throwing on the street right now, and I forgot everything else. I'll simply have to go down and hold a copy of it in my hands."

"You're just a big boy," laughed Aunt Constance. "Will you ever grow up?"

"I hope not," declared Agnes, and taking his arm she strolled with him to the door in perfect peace and confidence.

CHAPTER XXVI

MR. STONE LEAVES BOBBY A PARTING COMMISSION AND A LEFT-HANDED BLESSING

IT looked good to Bobby, that late extra of the *Bulletin*, and the force that he had kept on duty to get it out greeted him, as he walked through the office, with a running fire of comment and congratulation that was almost like applause. He had bought a copy on the street as he came in, and as he spread it out there came upon him a thrill of realization that this ought to be the beginning of the end.

It was. The fact that Bobby, through the *Bulletin*, had forced this action, made him a power to be reckoned with; and straws, whole bales of them, began to show which way the wind was blowing.

One morning a delegation headed by the Reverend Doctor Larynx waited upon him. The Reverend Doctor was a minister of great ingenuity and force, who sought the salvation of souls through such vital topics as Shall Men Go Coatless in Summer? The Justice of Three-Cent Car Fares, and The Billboards

Reverend Larynx with four thoroughly respectable men of business FIRCAUSER.

Must Go. All public questions, civic, state or national, were thoroughly thrashed out in the pulpit of the Reverend Larynx, and turned adrift with the seal of his condemnation or approval duly fixed upon them; and he managed to get his name and picture in the papers almost as often as the man who took eighty-seven bottles of Elixo and still survived. With him were four thoroughly respectable men of business, two of whom wore side-whiskers and the other two of whom wore white bow-ties.

"Fine business, Mr. Burnit," said the Reverend Doctor Larynx in a loud, hearty voice, advancing with three strides and clasping Bobby's hand in a vise-like grip; for he was a red-blooded minister, was the Reverend Doctor Larynx, and he believed in getting down among the "pee-pul." "The *Bulletin* has proved itself a mighty fine engine of reform, and the reputable citizens of this municipality now see a ray of hope before them."

"I'm afraid that the reputable citizens," ventured Bobby, "have no one but themselves to blame for their past hopeless condition. They're too selfish to vote."

"You have hit the nail on the head," declaimed the Reverend Larynx with a loud, hearty laugh, "but the *Bulletin* will rouse them to a sense of duty. Last night, Mr. Burnit, the Utopian Club was formed with an initial membership of over seventy, and it selected

a candidate for mayor of whom the *Bulletin* is bound to approve. Shake hands with Mr. Freedom, the Utopian Club's candidate for mayor, Mr. Burnit."

Bobby shook hands with Mr. Freedom quite nicely, and studied him curiously.

He was one of the two who wore side-whiskers and a habitual Prince Albert, and he displayed a phenomenal length from lower lip to chin, which, by reason of his extremely high and narrow forehead, gave his features the appearance of being grouped in tiny spots somewhere near the center of a long, yellow cylinder. Mr. Freedom, he afterward ascertained, was a respectable singing-teacher.

"Professor Freedom," went on the Reverend Doctor Larynx, still loudly and heartily, "has the time to devote to this office, as well as the ideal qualifications. He has no vices whatever. He does not even smoke nor use tobacco in any form, and under his régime the saloons of this town would be turned into vacant store-rooms, if there are laws to make possible such action."

"I do not want the saloons put out of business," declared Bobby. "I merely want them vacated at twelve every night, without exception."

When Doctor Larynx and his delegation went away in wrath the leader was already preparing his sermon upon The Iniquity of the Sons of Rich Fathers.

On the following day a delegation from the business men's club waited upon him. The business men's club wanted a business administration. This crowd Bobby handled differently. Upon his desk, tabulated in advance against just such an emergency, he had statistics concerning all the business men's administrations that had been tried in various cities, and he submitted this statement without argument. It needed none.

"Politics is in itself a distinct business," he explained. "You would not one of you take up the duties of a surveyor without previous training. The only trouble is that there are no restrictions placed upon politicians. I propose to use them, but to regulate them."

He did not convert the delegation by this one interview, but he did by cultivating these men and others of their kind separately. He ate luncheons and dinners with them at the Traders' Club, played billiards with them, smoked and talked with them; and the burden of his talk was Chalmers. When he finally got ready for his campaign the business men were with him unanimously, at least outwardly. Inwardly, there were reservations, for the matter of special privileges was one to be very gravely considered; and special privileges, at a price not entirely prohibitive, was the bulwark of Stone's régime.

"But the Stone régime," Bobby advised them, coming brutally to the point and telling them what he knew of their own affairs and Stone's, "is about to come to an end. The handwriting is on the wall, and you might just as well climb into the band wagon, for at last I have the public on my side."

At last he had. For a solid year he had been trying to understand the peculiar apathy of the public, and he did not understand it yet. They seemed to like Stone and to look upon his wholesale corruption as a joke; but by constant hammering, by showing the unredeemable cussedness of Stone and his crowd, he had produced some impression—an impression that, alas! was of the surface only—until the investigating committee began its sessions. When it became understood, however, that certain of the thieves might actually be sent to the penitentiary, then who so loud in their denunciation as the public? Why, Stone had robbed them right and left; why, Stone was an enemy to mankind; why, Stone and all his friends were monsters whom it were a good and a holy thing to skewer and flay and cast into everlasting brimstone!

Facts were uncovered that set the entire city in turmoil. More than fifty men who had never been born had been carried upon the city and county pay-rolls, and half of their salaries went directly into Stone's pocket, the other half going to the men who conducted

this paying enterprise. Contracts for city paving and other improvements were let to favored bidders at an enormous figure, and Stone personally had one-fourth of the huge profits on "scamped" work, another fourth going to those who arranged the details and did the collecting. Innumerable instances of this sort were brought out; but the biggest scandal of all, in that it involved men who should have been unassailable, was that of the banks. The relentless probe brought out the fact that all city and county funds had been distributed among four banks, the deposits yielding no revenue whatever to either commonwealth. These funds, however, had paid privately two per cent. interest, and this interest was paid in cash, in sealed envelopes, to the city and county auditors and treasurers, who took the envelopes unbroken to Stone for distribution. The amounts thus diverted from the proper channels totaled to an enormous figure, and, as this money was the most direct and approachable, Chalmers, who had the interesting rôle of inquisitor, set out to get it. The officials who had been longest at the crib, grown incautious were now men of property, and by the use of red-hot pincers Chalmers was able to restore nearly sixty thousand dollars of stolen money, with the possibility of more in sight.

It was upon the heels of this that Chalmers' candi-

dacy for mayor was announced, and the manner in which the Stone machine dropped to pieces was laughable. Chalmers, and the entire slate so carefully prepared by Bobby in conjunction with the shrewd old fox, Cal Lewis, won by a majority so overwhelming as to be almost unanimous. Immediately upon Chalmers' election heads began to drop, and the first to go was Cooley, chief of police, in whom, four years later, Bobby recognized the driver of his ice wagon. Coincident with the election came well-founded rumors of grand jury indictments. Two of Stone's closest and busiest lieutenants, who were most in danger of being presented with nice new suits of striped clothing, quietly converted their entire property into cash and then just as quietly slipped away to Honduras.

Late one afternoon, as Bobby sat alone in his room in the almost deserted *Bulletin* building, so worried over his business affairs that he had no time for elation over his political and personal triumphs, the door opened and Stone stood before him. The pouches under Stone's eyes were heavier and darker, his cheeks drooped flabbily and he seemed to have fallen away inside his clothes, but upon his face there sat the same stern impassiveness. Bobby instantly rose, having good cause to want to be well planted upon his feet with this man near him. Stone carefully closed the

door behind him and advanced to the other side of Bobby's desk.

"Well, you win," he said huskily.

Bobby drew a long breath.

"It has cost me a lot of money, Mr. Stone. It has left me almost flat broke—but I got you."

"I give you credit," admitted Stone. "I didn't think anybody could do it, least of all a kid; but you got me and you got me good. It's been a hard fight for all of us, I guess. I'm a little run down," and he hesitated curiously; "my doctor says I got to take an ocean trip." He suddenly blazed out: "Damn it, you might as well be told! I'm running away!"

Bobby found himself silent. For two years he had planned and hoped for this moment of victory. Now that the exultant moment had come he found himself feeling strangely sorry for this big man, in spite of his unutterable rascality.

"I ain't coming back," Stone went on after a pause, "and there's something I want to ask you to do for me."

"I should be glad to do it, Mr. Stone, if it is anything I can allow myself to do."

"Aw, cut it!" growled Stone. "Look here. I got a list of some poor mutts I been looking out for, and I've just set aside a wad to keep it going. I want you to look after 'em and see that the money gets spread

around right. I know you're square. I don't know anybody else to give it to."

To Bobby he handed a list of some fifty names and addresses, with monthly amounts set down opposite them. They were widows and orphans and helpless creatures of all sorts and conditions, blind and deaf and crippled, whom Stone, in the great passion that every man has for some one to love and revere him, and in the secret tenderness inseparable from all big natures, had made his pensioners.

"There ain't a soul on earth knows about these but me, and every one of 'em is wise to it that if they ever blat a word about it the pap's cut off. I don't want a thing, not even a hint, printed about this—see? I ain't afraid that you'll use it in the paper after me asking you not to, so I don't ask you for any promise."

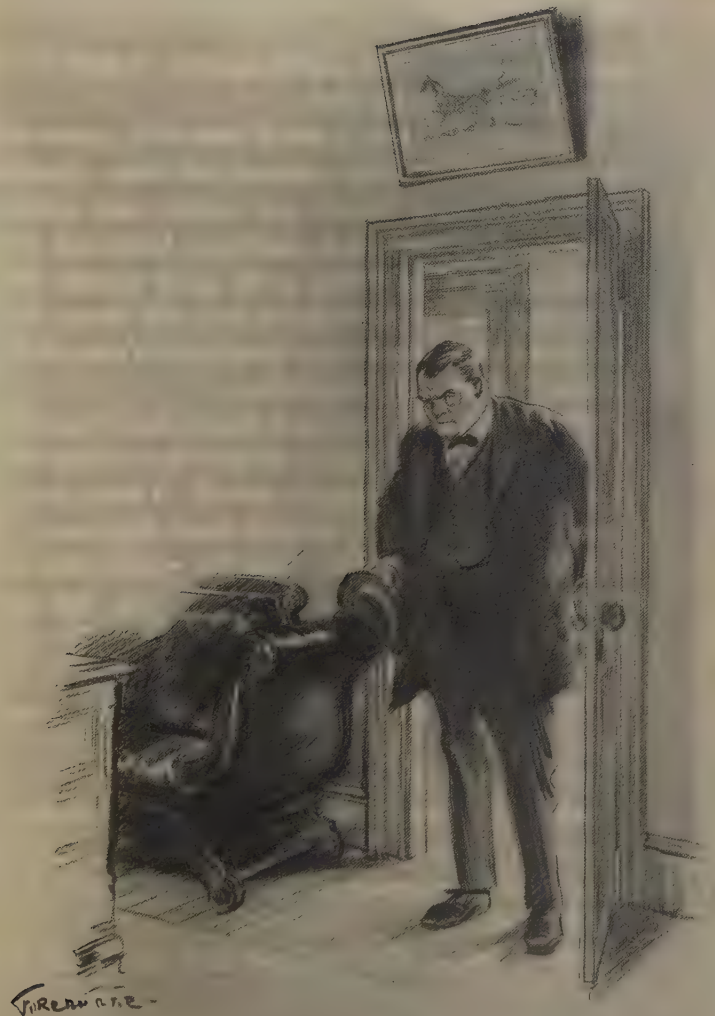
"I'll do it with pleasure," offered Bobby.

"Well, I guess that's about all," said Stone, and turned to go.

Bobby came from behind his desk.

"After all, Stone," he said, with some hesitation, "I'm sorry to lose an enemy so worth while. I wish you good luck wherever you are going," and he held out his hand.

Stone looked at the proffered hand and shook his head.



I'd rather smash your face

"I'd rather smash your face," he growled, and passed out of the door.

It was the last that Bobby ever saw of him, and all that the *Bulletin* carried about his flight was the "fact," not at all too prominently displayed for the man's importance as a public figure, that Stone's health was in jeopardy and that he was about to take an ocean voyage upon the advice of his physician; and on that day Stone's picture disappeared from the place it had occupied upon the front page of the *Bulletin*.

It was a victory complete and final, but it was not without its sting, for on that same day Bobby faced an empty exchequer. It was Johnson who brought him the sad but not at all unexpected tidings, at a moment when Chalmers and Agnes happened to be in the office. Seeing them, Johnson hesitated at the door.

"What is it, Johnson?" asked Bobby.

"Oh, nothing much," said Mr. Johnson with a pained expression. "I'll come back again."

He had a sheet of paper with him and Bobby held out his hand for it. Still hesitating, old Johnson brought it forward and laid it down on Bobby's desk.

"You know you told me, sir, to bring this to you."

Had the others not been present he would have added the reminder that he had been instructed to

bring this statement a week in advance of the time when Bobby should no longer be able to meet his pay-roll. Bobby looked up from the statement without any thought of reserve before these three.

"Well, it's come. I'm broke."

"Not so much a calamity in this instance as it has been in others," said Agnes sagely. "Fortunately, your trustee is right here, and your trustee's lawyer, who has two hundred and fifty thousand dollars still to your account."

Bobby listened in frowning silence, and old Johnson, who had prepared himself before he came upstairs for such a contingency, quietly laid upon Bobby's desk one of the familiar gray envelopes and withdrew. It was inscribed:

To My Son Robert, Upon the Turning Over to Him of His Sixth and Last Experimental Fund

"If a man fails six times he'd better be pensioned and left to live a life of pleasant ease; for everybody has a right to be happy, and not all can gain happiness through their own efforts. So, if you fail this last time, don't worry, my boy, but take measures to cut your garment according to the income from a million and a half dollars, invested so safely that it can yield you but two per cent. If the fault of your ill success lies with anybody it lies with me, and I

blame myself bitterly for it many times as I write this letter.

"Remember, first, last and always, that I want you to be happy."

Bobby passed the letter to Agnes and the envelope to Chalmers.

"This is a little premature," he said, smiling at both of them, "for I'm not applying for the sixth portion."

Agnes looked up at him in surprise.

"Not applying for it?"

"No," he declared, "I don't want it. I understand there is a provision that I can not use two of these portions in the same business."

Both Chalmers and Agnes nodded.

"I don't want money for any other business than the *Bulletin*," declared Bobby, "and if my father has it fixed so that he won't help me as I want to be helped, I don't want it at all."

"There is another provision about which you perhaps don't know," Chalmers informed him; "if you refuse this money it reverts to the main fund."

Bobby studied this over thoughtfully.

"Let it revert," said he. "I'll sink or swim right here."

The next day he went to his bank and tried to

borrow money. They liked Bobby very much indeed over at the bank. He was a vigorous young man, a young man of affairs, a young man who had won a great public victory, a young man whom it was generally admitted had done the city an incalculable amount of good; but they could not accept Bobby nor the *Bulletin* as a business proposition. Had they not seen the original fund dwindle and dwindle for two years until now there was nothing left? Wouldn't another fund dwindle likewise? It is no part of a bank's desire to foreclose upon securities. They are quite well satisfied with just the plain interest. Moreover, the *Bulletin* wasn't such heavy security, anyhow.

Bobby tried another bank with like results, and also some of his firm business friends at the Traders' Club. In the midst of his dilemma President De Graff of the First National came to him.

"I understand you have been trying to borrow some money, Burnit?"

It sounded to Bobby as if De Graff had come to gloat over him, since he had been instrumental in dragging De Graff and the First National through the mire.

"Yes, sir, I have," he nevertheless answered steadily.

"Why didn't you come to us?" demanded De Graff.

"To you?" said Bobby, amazed. "I never thought

of you in that connection at all, De Graff, after all that has happened."

De Graff shrugged his shoulders.

"That was like pulling a tooth. It hurt and one dreaded it, but it was so much better when it was out. Until you jumped into the fight Stone had me under his thumb. The minute the exposure came he had no further hold on me. It is the only questionable thing I ever did in my life, and I'm glad it was exposed. I admire you for it, even though it will hurt me in a business way for a long time to come. But about this money now. How much do you need at the present time?"

"I'd like an account of about twenty-five thousand."

"I can let you have it at once," said De Graff, "and as much more as you need, up to a certain reasonable point that I think will be amply sufficient."

"Is this Stone's money?" asked Bobby with sudden suspicion.

De Graff smiled.

"No," said he, "it is my own. I have faith in you, Burnit, and faith in the *Bulletin*. Suppose you step over to the First National with me right away."

CHAPTER XXVII

AUNT CONSTANCE ELLISTON LOSES ALL HER PATIENCE WITH A CERTAIN PROSAIC COURTSHIP

THAT night, with a grave new responsibility upon him and a grave new elation, sturdier and stronger than he had ever been in his life, and more his own master, Bobby went out to see Agnes.

"Agnes, when my father made you my trustee," he said, "he laid upon you the obligation that you were not to marry me until I had proved myself either a success or a failure, didn't he?"

"He did," assented Agnes demurely.

"But you are no longer my trustee. The last money over which you had nominal control has reverted to the main fund, which is in the hands of Mr. Barrister; so that releases you."

Agnes laughed softly and shook her head.

"The obligation wasn't part of the trusteeship," she reminded him.

"But if I choose to construe it that way," he persisted, "and declare the obligation null and void, how

soon could you get ready to be married to the political boss of this town and one of its leading business men? Agnes," he went on, suddenly quite serious, "I can not do without you any longer. I have waited long enough. I need you and you must come to me."

"I'll come if you insist," she said simply, and laid both her hands in his. "But, Bobby, let's think about this a minute. Let's think what it means. I have been thinking of it many, many days, and really and truly I don't like to give up, because of its bearing upon our future strength. Yesterday I drove down Grand Street and looked up at that Trimmer and Company sign, and so long as that is there, Bobby, I could not feel right about our deserting the colors, as it were; that is, unless you have definitely given up the fight."

"Given up!" repeated Bobby quickly. "Why, I have just begun. I've been to school all this time, Agnes, and to a hard school, but now I'm sure I have learned my lesson. I have won a fight or two; I have had the taste of blood; I'm going after more; I'm going to win."

"I'm sure that you will," she repeated. "Think how much better satisfied we will be after you have done so."

"Yes, but think, too, of the time it will take," he protested. "First of all I must earn money; that is,

I must make the *Bulletin* pay. I can do that. It is on the edge of earning its way right now, but I owe twenty-five thousand dollars. It is going to take a long, long time for me to win this battle, and in it I need you."

"I am always right here, Bobby," she reminded him. "I have never failed you when you needed me, have I? But maybe it won't take so long. You say you are going to make the *Bulletin* pay. If you do that counts for a business success, enough to release you on that side. But really, Bobby, how difficult a task would it be to get back control of your father's store?"

"Hopeless, just now," said he.

"How much money would it take?"

"Well, not so very much in comparison with the business itself," he told her. "I own two hundred and sixty thousand dollars' worth of stock, Trimmer owns two hundred and forty thousand, while sixty thousand more are scattered among his relatives and dependents. That stock is not for sale, that is the trouble; but if I could buy twenty-one thousand dollars of it I could do what I liked with the entire concern."

"Then Bobby, let's not think of anything else but how to get that stock. Let's insist on having that for our wedding present."

Bobby regarded her gravely for a long time.

"Agnes, you're a brick!" he finally concluded. "You're right, as you have always been. We'll wait. But you don't know, oh, you don't know how hard that is for me!"

"It is not the easiest thing in the world for me," she gently reminded him.

From the time that she had laid her hands in his he had held them, and now he had gathered them to him, pressing them upon his breast. Suddenly, overcome by his great longing for her, he clasped her in his arms and held her, and pressed his lips to hers. For a moment she yielded to that embrace and closed her eyes, and then she gently drew away from him.

"We mustn't indulge in that sort of thing very much," she reminded him, "or we're likely to lose all our good resolutions."

"Good resolutions," declared Bobby, "are a nuisance."

She smiled and shook her head.

"Look at the people who haven't any," she reminded him.

It was perhaps half an hour later when an idea which brought with it a smile came to her.

"We've definitely resolved now to wait until you have either accomplished what you set out to do, or completely failed, haven't we?"

"Yes," he assented soberly.

"Then I'm going to open one of the letters your father left for us. I have been dying with curiosity to know what is in it," and hurrying up to her secretary she brought down one of the inevitable gray envelopes, addressed:

To My Children Upon the Occasion of Their Deciding to Marry Before the Limit of My Prohibition

"What I can not for the life of me understand is why the devil you didn't do it long ago!"

Bobby was so thoroughly awake to the underlying principle of Agnes' contention that even this letter did nothing to change his viewpoint.

"For it isn't him, it is us, or rather it is me, who is to be considered," he declared. "But it does seem to me, Agnes, as if for once we had got the better of the governor."

They were still laughing over the unexpectedness of the letter when Aunt Constance came in, and they showed it to her.

"Good!" she exclaimed, dwelling longer upon the inscription than upon the letter itself. "I think you're quite sensible, and I'll arrange the finest wedding for Agnes that has ever occurred in the Elliston

family. You must give me at least a couple of months, though. When is it to come off? Soon, I suppose?"

Carefully and patiently they explained the stand they had taken. At first she thought they were joking, and it took considerable reiteration on their part for her to understand that they were not.

"I declare I have no patience with you!" she avowed. "Of all the humdrum, prosaic people I ever saw, you are the very worst! There is no romance in you. You're as cool about it as if marriage were a commercial partnership. Oh, Dan!" and she called her husband from the library. "Now what do you think of this?" she demanded, and explained the ridiculous attitude of the young people.

"Great!" decided Uncle Dan. "Allow me to congratulate you," and he shook hands heartily with both Agnes and Bobby, whereat Aunt Constance denounced him as being a sordid soul of their own stripe and went to bed in a huff. She got up again, however, when she heard Agnes retire to her own room for the night, and came in to wrestle with that young lady in spirit. She found Agnes, however, obdurate in her content, and ended by becoming an enthusiastic supporter of the idea. "Although I did have my heart so set on a fine wedding," she plaintively concluded. "I have been planning it for ages."

"Just keep on planning, auntie," replied Agnes. "No doubt you will acquire some brilliant new ideas before the time comes."

So this utterly placid courtship went on in its old tranquil way, with Bobby a constant two and three nights a week visitor to the Elliston home, and with the two young people discussing business more frequently than anything else; for Bobby had learned to come to Agnes for counsel in everything. Just now his chief burden of conversation was the letting of the new waterworks contract, which, with public sentiment back of him, he had fought off until after the Stone administration had ended. Hamilton Ferris, an old polo antagonist of his, represented one of the competing firms as its president, and Bobby had been most anxious that he should be the successful bidder, as was Agnes; for Bobby had brought Ferris to dinner at the Ellistons and to call a couple of times during his stay in the city, and all of the Ellistons liked him tremendously. Bobby was quite crestfallen when the opening of the bids proved Ferris to be the second lowest man.

"I've tried hard enough for it," declared Ferris during a final dinner at the Ellistons that night. "There isn't much doing this year, and I figured closer than anybody in my employ would dared to have done. In view of my estimate I can not for the

life of me see how your local company overbid us all by over a million dollars."

"It is curious," admitted Bobby, still much puzzled.

"It's rather unsportsmanlike in me to whine," resumed Ferris, "but I am bound to believe that there is a colored gentleman in the woodpile somewhere."

"That would be no novelty," returned Bobby. "Ever since I bought the *Bulletin* I have been gunning for Ethiopians amid the fuel and always found them. The Middle West Construction Company, however, is a new load of kindling to me. I never heard of it until it was announced this morning as the lowest bidder."

"Nobody ever heard of it," asserted Ferris. "It was no doubt organized for the sole purpose of bidding on this job. Probably when you delve into the matter you will discover the fine Italian hand of your political boss."

"Hardly," chuckled Uncle Dan, indulging in his recent propensity to brag on Bobby. "Our local boss was Sam Stone, and Bobby has just succeeded in running him and two of his expert wire workers out of the country."

"If anybody here is the political boss it is Bobby," observed Agnes, laughing.

"I'm sorry to have to suspect him," laughed Fer-

ris. "Well, there is no use crying over spilled milk; but I had hoped to bring Mrs. Ferris out for a good long visit."

"Give your wife my regards, Mr. Ferris, and tell her she must come anyhow," insisted Mrs. Elliston. "Since I have heard that you married the daughter of my old schoolmate, I have been wanting the Keystone Construction Company to have a big contract here more than you have, I think."

"Sounds very nice, Constance," said her husband dryly, "but I doubt if any woman ever wanted to see the daughter of her old schoolmate as badly as any man ever wanted to make a million dollars. Bobby, I'll make you a small bet. I'll bet your new construction company is composed of the shattered fragments of the old Stone crowd. I'll even bet that Silas Trimmer is in it."

"If he is," suddenly declared Agnes, "I'm going to go into the detective business," whereat Uncle Dan enjoyed himself hugely. Her vindictiveness whenever the name of Silas Trimmer was mentioned had become highly amusing to him, in spite of the fact that he admired her for it.

"Go right ahead," said Bobby approvingly. "If you find anything that will enable me to give that gentleman a financial backset I'll see that you get a handsome reward. In the meantime I'm going to find

out something about the Middle West Construction Company myself."

Accordingly he asked his managing editor about that concern the first thing in the morning.

Ben Jolter lit his old pipe, folded his bare arms and patted them alternately in speculative enjoyment.

"I have something like two pages of information about them, if we could use it," he announced. "I have been getting reports from the entire scouting brigade ever since the contract was let yesterday, and you may now prepare for a shock. The largest stock-holders of the concern are Silas Trimmer and Frank Sharpe, and the minor stock-holders, almost to a man, consist of those who had their little crack at the public crib under your old, time-tried and true friend, Sam Stone."

"I admit that I am properly shocked," responded Bobby.

"It hinges together beautifully," Jolter went on. "The whole waterworks project was a Stone scheme, and Stone people—even though Stone himself is wiped out—secure the contract. The last expiring act of the Stone administration was to employ Ed Scales as chief engineer until the completion of the waterworks, which may occupy eight or ten years, and the contract with Scales is binding on the city

unless he can be impeached for cause. Scales was city engineer under the previous reform spasm, but Stone probably found him good material and kept him on. The waterworks plans were prepared under his supervision and he got them ready for bidding. Now what's the answer?"

"Easy," returned Bobby. "The city loses."

"Right," agreed Jolter; "but how? I don't see that we can do anything. Scales, having prepared the plans, is the logical man to see that they are carried out, and he is perfectly competent. His record is clean, so that he owns no property, nor does any of his family—although that may be because he never had a chance. The Middle West Construction Company, though just incorporated, is financially sound, thoroughly bonded, and, moreover, has put into the hands of the city ample guarantee for its twenty per cent. forfeit as required by the terms of the contract. There isn't a thing that the *Bulletin* can do except to boost local enterprise with a bit of reservation, then lay low and wait for developments."

"I dislike to do it," objected Bobby. "It hurts me to think of mentioning Stone or Trimmer in any complimentary way whatsoever."

Jolter laughed. "You're a fine and consistent enemy," he said.

"I guess I came by it honestly," smiled Bobby, and

from a drawer in his desk took one of the gray John Burnit letters.

"'Always forgive your enemies,'" read Jolter aloud; "'that is, after you are good and even with them.'"

"Here goes for them, then," said Jolter, passing back the letter with an approving chuckle. "We'll let them go right ahead, and in the meantime the *Bulletin* will do a lot of real nifty old sleuthing."

But the *Bulletin's* sleuthing brought nothing wrong to light, and work upon the big waterworks contract was begun with a rush.

In the meantime Agnes, true to her threat, was doing some investigating on her own account. She renewed her girlhood acquaintance with Trimmer's daughter, who was now Mrs. Clarence Smythe, and with others of the Trimmer connection, and she saw these women folk frequently for the sole purpose of gathering up any scraps of information that might drop. The best she could gather, however, was that Clarence Smythe and Silas Trimmer were no longer upon very friendly terms; that Mrs. Smythe had quarreled with her father about Clarence; also that Clarence's Trimmer and Company stock was in Mrs. Smythe's name. These scraps of information, slight as they were, she religiously brought to Bobby. When the new waterworks began Agnes saved all the

newspaper clippings relating to that tremendous undertaking, and she frequently drove out there of evenings after the workmen had all gone home; with just what purpose she could not say, but she felt impelled, as she half-sheepishly confessed to her Uncle Dan, to "keep an eye on the job." She kept up her absurd surveillance in spite of all Uncle Dan's ridicule, and one evening she came home in a state of quivering excitement. She called up Bobby at once.

"Bobby," she wanted to know, "has the city decided to cut down expenses on the waterworks, or have the plans been changed for any reason?"

"Not that the public knows about," replied Bobby. "Why?"

"The pumping station is not so big as the newspapers said it was to be. It is over thirty feet shorter and over twenty feet narrower."

"How do you know?" demanded Bobby.

"I took Wilkins out there with me to-night and had him measure it for me with a yard-stick while the watchman had gone for his supper," replied Agnes triumphantly.

Bobby stopped to laugh.

"Impossible," said he. "You have measured it wrong or misunderstood it in some way or other."

"You go out and measure it for yourself," insisted Agnes.

Partly to humor her and partly because his interest had been aroused, Bobby went out the next night and measured the pumping station, the excavation for which was already completed, and to his astonishment found that Agnes' measurements were correct. He immediately wrote to Ferris about it, told him the present dimensions and asked him upon what basis he had figured. In place of replying Ferris came on. Arriving in the city on Saturday, on Sunday he and Bobby went out to the site, and Ferris examined the new waterworks with a deliberation which well-nigh got him into serious trouble with the watchman.

"Well, young man, your fair city is stung," declared Ferris. "The trenches are not so deep as specified by two feet, and from their width I can tell that the foundation walls are to be at least six inches thinner. I bid on the best grade of Portland cement for that job. It was spelled with a *B*, however, in my copy of the specification, and I asked your man Scales about it. 'Oh,' said he, 'that's a misprint in the typewriting,' and he changed the *B* to *P* with a lead pencil. Under that shed are about a thousand barrels of *Bortland* cement. I never heard of that brand, but I can tell cement when I see it, and this stuff will have no more adhesive power than plain mud. Bedford stone was specified. They have several car-loads of stone dumped down here which is not Bedford

stone at all. I could tell a piece of Bedford in the dark. This is an inferior rock which will discolor in six months and will disintegrate in five years."

Bobby thought the thing over quietly for some minutes.

"About the dimensions of the building, Ferris, you might possibly be mistaken, might you not?" asked Bobby.

"Impossible," returned Ferris. "I have not figured on many jobs for years, but our chief estimator had been sent down to Cuba when this thing came up and I did the work myself, so I have a very vivid memory of it and can not possibly have it confused with any other bid. Moreover, we have all those things on record in our office and I looked it up before I came away. The dimensions of the power house and pumping station were to be one hundred and ninety by one hundred and sixty feet. The present dimensions are one hundred and fifty-eight by one hundred and thirty-three."

Bobby was thoughtfully silent for a while.

"Do you remember who else bid on the contract?" he inquired presently.

"Every one of them," smiled Ferris. "I can give you their addresses and the names of the people to wire to if that is what you want. We meet them on every big job."

"Do you mind wiring yourself?" asked Bobby. "They would be more apt to give you confidential information."

"With pleasure," agreed Ferris, and wrote the telegrams.

On the following morning Bobby received answers at his office to all but one of his telegrams, and the information was unanimous that the original plans had called for a building one hundred and ninety by one hundred and sixty feet.

"Now I begin to understand," said Ferris. "This was the first set of important plans I ever saw in which the dimensions were not marked, but they were most accurately drawn to scale, one-fourth inch to the foot. They are probably using the same drawings with an altered scale, although it would be an absurdly clumsy trick. If that is the case it is easy to see how the Middle West Construction Company could underbid us by more than a million dollars and still make more money than we figured on."

Bobby reached for the telephone.

"Get me the mayor's office," he called to the girl at his private telephone exchange. "Will you 'stick around' to see the fuss?" he inquired with grim pleasure, as he hung up the receiver.

Ferris grinned as he noted the light of battle dawning in Bobby's eyes.

"I don't know," he replied. "It depends on the size and duration of the fuss."

"If you don't stay I'll have you subpœnaed. I may have to, anyhow. As for the size of the fuss, I can promise you a bully one if what you surmise is correct."

His telephone bell rang and Bobby turned to it quickly.

"Hello, Chalmers!" he began, then laughed. "Beg pardon, Agnes; I thought it was the mayor's office;" he apologized, then listened intently. There were a few eager queries, and when Bobby hung up the telephone receiver it was with great satisfaction. "I haven't seen as much fun in sight since I began my fight on Stone," he declared. "Miss Elliston, who has developed a marvelous new capacity for finding out other men's business secrets through their women folk, has just telephoned me the results of her last night's detective work. It seems that Silas Trimmer, one of the heavy backers of the Middle West Construction Company, has just negotiated a loan upon his stock in the mercantile establishment of Trimmer and Company, my share of which was known as the John Burnit Store until Trimmer beat me out of control. I understand that Trimmer has mortgaged everything to the hilt to go into this waterworks deal."

The bell rang again. This time it was Chalmers.

"Say, Chalmers," said Bobby, "I want you to get me some sort of a legal document that will allow me to take possession of and examine all the books, papers and drawings of the city engineer's department, including the waterworks engineer's office. . . . Yes, you can, Chalmers," he insisted, against an obvious protest. "There is some legal machinery you can put in motion to get it, and I want it right away. Moreover, I want you to secure me somebody to serve the writ and to keep it quiet."

Then he explained briefly what had been partly discovered and partly surmised. Next Bobby sent for Jolter and laid the facts before him, to the great joy of that aggressive gentleman. Then he called up Biff Bates, and made an appointment with him to meet him at Jimmy Platt's office in half an hour. He would have telephoned Platt, but the engineer had no telephone.

CHAPTER XXVIII

BIFF RENEWS A PLEASANT ACQUAINTANCE AND BOBBY INAUGURATES A TRAGEDY

"IS MR. PLATT in?"

Biff stood hesitantly in the door when he found the place occupied only by a brown-haired girl, who was engaged in the quiet, unprofessional occupation of embroidering a shirtwaist pattern.

The girl looked up with a smile at the young man's awkwardness, and felt impelled to put him at his ease.

"He's not in just now, but I expect him within ten or fifteen minutes at the outside. Won't you sit down, Mr. Bates?"

He looked at her much mystified at this calling of his name, but he mumbled his thanks for the chair which she put forward for him, and, sitting with his hat upon his knees, contemplated her furtively.

"I guess you don't remember me," she said in frank enjoyment of his mystification, "but I remember you perfectly. I used to see you quite often out at West-

I'd be tickled black in the face to make good any day

marsh when Mr. Burnit was trying to redeem that persistent swamp. I am Mr. Platt's sister."

"No!" exclaimed Biff in amazement. "You can't be the kid that used to ride on the excavating cars, and go home with yellow clay on your dresses every day."

"I'm the kid," said she with a musical laugh; "and I'm afraid I haven't quite outgrown my hoydenish tendencies even yet."

Biff had no comment to make. He was lost in wonder over that eternal mystery—the transformation which occurs when a girl passes from fourteen to eighteen.

"Don't you remember?" she gaily went on. "You gave me a boxing lesson out there one afternoon and promised to give me more of them, but you never did."

Biff cleared a sudden huskiness from his throat.

"I'd be tickled black in the face to make good any day," he urged earnestly, and then hastily corrected the offer to: "That is, I mean I'll be very glad to—to finish the job."

Immediately he turned violently red.

"I don't seem to care as much for the accomplishment as I did then," observed the girl with a smile, "but I do wish I could learn to swing my nice Indian clubs without cracking the back of my head."

"I got a medal for club swinging," said Biff diffidently. "I'll teach you any time you like. It's easy. Come right over to the gym on Tuesday and Friday forenoons. Those are ladies' mornings, and I've got nothing but real classy people at that."

The entrance of Mr. Platt interrupted Biff just as he was beginning to feel at ease, and threw that young gentleman, who always appropriated and absorbed other people's troubles, into much concern; for Mr. Platt was hollow-eyed and sunken-cheeked from worry. His coat was very shiny, and his hat was shabby. The dusty and neglected drawing on his crude drawing-table told the story all too well. The engineering business, so far as Mr. Platt was concerned, seemed to be a total failure. Nevertheless, he greeted Mr. Bates warmly, and inquired after Mr. Burnit.

"He's always fine," said Biff. "He had me come up here to meet him."

"I should scarcely think he would care to come here after the unfortunate outcome of the work I did for him," said Mr. Platt.

"You mean on old Applerod's Subtraction?"

"You couldn't hardly call it the Applerod Addition, could you?" responded Jimmy with a smile. "That was a most unlucky transaction for me as well as for Mr. Burnit."

Biff looked about the room comprehendingly.

"I guess it put you on the hummer, all right," said he. "It don't look as if you done anything since."

"But very little," confessed Mr. Platt. "My failure on that job hurt my reputation almost fatally."

Biff gravely sought within himself for words of consolation, one of his fleeting ideas being to engage Mr. Platt on the spot to survey the site of Bates' Athletic Hall, although there was not the slightest possible need for such a survey. In the midst of his sympathetic gloom came in Mr. Ferris and Bobby.

"Jimmy, how would you like to be chief construction engineer of the new waterworks?" asked Bobby, with scant waste of time, after he had introduced Ferris.

Mr. Platt gasped and paled.

"I think I could be urged, from a sense of public duty, to give up my highly lucrative private practice," he said with a pitiful attempt at levity, though his voice was husky, and his tightly clenched hand, where the white knuckles rested upon his drawing-table, trembled.

"Don't build up too much hope on it, Jimmy; but if what we surmise is correct you will have a chance at it," and he briefly explained. "We're going right out there," concluded Bobby, "and I want you

to go along to help investigate. We have to find some incriminating evidence, and you'd be more likely to know how and where to look for it than any of us."

It is needless to say that Jimmy Platt took his hat with alacrity. Before he went out, with new hope in his heart, he turned and shook hands ecstatically with his sister. Still holding Jimmy's hand she turned to Bobby impulsively:

"I do hope, Mr. Burnit, that this turns out right for Jimmy."

Bobby turned to her abruptly and with a trace of a frown. It was a rather poorly trained office employee, he thought, who would intrude herself into conversation that it was her duty to forget, but Biff Bates caught that look and stepped into the breach.

"This is Nellie, Bobby—that is, it used to be Nellie," he stated with a quick correction, and blushed violently.

"It is Nellie still," laughed that young lady to Bobby, and the puzzled look upon his face was swiftly driven away by a smile, as he suddenly recognized in her traces of the long-legged girl who had been always present at the Applerod Addition, who had ridden in his automobile, and had confided to him most volubly, upon innumerable occasions, that her brother Jimmy was about the smartest man who ever sighted through a transit.

In the hastily constructed frame office out at the waterworks site, Ed Scales, pale and emaciated and with black rings under his eyes, looked up nervously as Bobby's little army, reënforced from four to six by the addition of a "plain clothes man" and Dillingham, the *Bulletin's* star reporter, invaded the place. Before a word was spoken, Feeney, the plain clothes man, presented Scales with a writ, which the latter attempted to read with unseeing eyes, his fingers trembling.

"What does this mean?"

"That I have come to take possession," said Bobby, "with power to make an examination of every scrap of paper in the place. Frankly, Scales, we expect to find something crooked about the waterworks contract. If we do you know the result. If we do not, the interruption will be only temporary, and you will have very pretty grounds for action; for I am taking a long shot, and if I don't find what I am after I have put myself and the mayor into a bad scrape."

Scales thrice opened his mouth to speak, and thrice there came no sound from his lips. Then he laid a bunch of keys upon his desk, shoving them toward Feeney, and rose. He half-staggered into the large coat room behind him. He had scarcely more than disappeared when there was the startling roar of a shot, and the body of Scales, with a round hole in the

temple, toppled, face downward, out of the door. It was Scales' tragic confession of guilt. They sprang instantly to him, but nothing could be done for him. He was dead when they reached him.

"Poor devil," said Ferris brokenly. "It is probably the first crooked thing he ever did in his life, and he hadn't nerve enough to go through with it. I feel like a murderer for my share in the matter."

Bobby, too, had turned sick; his senses swam and he felt numb and cold. He was aroused by a calm, dispassionate voice at the telephone. It was Dillingham, sending to the *Bulletin* a carefully lurid account of the tragedy, and of the probable causes leading up to it.

"We'll have an extra on the street in five minutes," he told Bobby with satisfaction as he rose. "That means that the *Chronicle* men will come out in a swarm, but it will take them a half-hour to get here. We have that much time, then, to dig up the evidence we are after, and if we hustle we can have a second extra out before the *Chronicle* can get a line. It's the biggest beat in years. Come on, boys, let's get busy," and he took up the keys that Scales had left on the desk.

Dillingham had no sooner left the telephone than Feeney took up the receiver and called for a number. The reporter turned upon him like a flash,

recognizing that call as the number of the coroner's office. Dillingham suddenly caught himself before he had spoken, and looked hastily about the room. In the corner near the floor was a little box with the familiar bells upon it, and binding screws that held the wires. Quickly Dillingham slipped over to that corner just as Feeney was saying:

"Hello! Coroner's office, this is Feeney. Is that you, Jack? . . . Well——"

At that instant Dillingham loosened a binding screw and slipped off the loop of the wire.

"Hello, coroner!" repeated Feeney. "I say, Jack! Hello! Hello! Hello, there! *Hello! Hello!*" Then Feeney pounded the mouthpiece, jerked the receiver hook up and down, yelled at exchange, and worked himself into a vast fever.

"What's the matter with this thing, anyhow, Dill?" he finally demanded.

"Exchange probably went to sleep on you," said Dillingham.

Easily he was now opening one by one the immense flat drawers of a drawing-case, and with much interest delving into the huge drawings that it contained.

"Come here, Mr. Platt," Dillingham went on. "You cast your eagle eye over these drawings while I do a little job of interviewing," and he walked over

to the employees of the office, who, since they had been roughly warned by Feeney not to go near "that body," had huddled, scared and limp, in the far corner of the room.

Perspiring and angry, Feeney tried for five solid minutes to obtain some response from the dead telephone, then he gave it up.

"I've got to go out and hunt up another 'phone," he declared. "Biff, I'll appoint you my deputy. Don't let anybody touch the corpse till the coroner comes."

"I'll go with you," said Bobby hastily, very glad to leave the room, and both he and Mr. Ferris accompanied Feeney. No sooner was Feeney out of the place than Dillingham reconnected the telephone and went back to his investigations. He was thoroughly satisfied, after a few questions, that the present employees knew nothing whatever, and Platt reported to him that every general drawing he could find was marked three-tenths inch to the foot, none being marked one-fourth.

"That doesn't matter so much," mused Dillingham. "It will be easy enough to prove that these are the same drawings that were provided the contestants, and six firms will swear that they were marked one-fourth of an inch to the foot. What we have to do is to prove that the drawings the Middle West Com-

pany used as the basis of their bid were marked one-fourth inch to the foot."

The telephone bell rang violently while Dillingham was puzzling over this matter, and one of the employees started to answer it.

"No, you don't!" shouted Dillingham. "You fellows are dispossessed."

He took down the receiver.

"Waterworks engineer's office?" came a brisk voice through the telephone.

"Yes," said Dillingham.

"This is the *Chronicle*. The *Bulletin* has an extra——"

Dillingham waited to hear no more. He hung up the receiver with a grin, and it was music in his ears to hear those bells impatiently jangling for the next ten minutes. It seemed to quicken his intelligence, for presently he slapped his hand upon his leg and jumped toward the group of employees in the corner.

"Say!" he demanded. "Who figured on this job for the Middle West Company?"

"Dan Rubble, I suppose," answered a lanky draftsman, who, still wearing his apron, had slipped his coat on over his oversleeves and retained his eyeshade under his straw hat. "At least, he seemed to know all about the plans. He's the boss contractor. There he is now."

Looking out of the window Dillingham saw a brawny, red-haired giant running from the tool-house, carrying a cylindrical tin case about five feet long. He pulled off the cap of this as he came and began to drag from the inside of the case a thick roll of blue-prints. He was hurrying toward a big asphalt caldron underneath which blazed a hot wood fire.

"Come on, Biff," yelled Dillingham, and hurried out of the door, closely followed by Bates.

They both ran with all their might toward the caldron, but before they could reach the spot Rubble had shoved the entire roll into the fire. Biff wasted no precious moments, but, glaring Mr. Rubble in the eye as he ran, doubled his fist with the evident intention of damaging that large gentleman's countenance with it. He suddenly ducked his round head as he approached, however, and plunged it into the middle of Mr. Rubble's appetite; whereupon Mr. Rubble grunted heavily, and sat down quite uncomfortably near to the caldron. Biff, though it scorched his hands, dragged the blazing roll of blue-prints from the flames and, seizing a near-by pail of water, started for the drawings, just as big Dan regained his feet and made a rush for him.

Dillingham, slight and no fighter but full of sand, jumped crosswise into that mêlée, and with a flying

leap literally hung himself about Rubble's neck. Big Dan, roaring like a bull at this unexpected and most unprofessional mode of warfare, placed his two hands upon Dillingham's hips and tried to force him away; failing in this, he ran straight forward with all this living clog hanging to him, and planted a terrific kick upon Biff's ribs, just as Biff had dashed the pail of water from end to end of the blazing roll of drawings. He poised for another kick, but Biff had dropped the pail by this time, and as the foot swung forward he grabbed it. Rubble, losing his balance, pitched forward, landing squarely upon the top of the unhappy Dillingham, who signified his retirement from the game with an astonishingly large "Woof!" to come from so small a body; moreover, he released his arms; but Rubble, freed from the weight on his chest, found another one on his back. Biff felt quite competent to manage him, but by this time half a dozen men came running from different directions, and as there were a hundred or more of them on the job, all beholden for their daily bread and butter to Mr. Rubble, things looked bad for Biff and Dillingham.

"Back up there, you mutts, or I'll make peek-a-boo patterns out of the lot of you!" howled a penetrating voice, and Mr. Feeney, heading the relief party, which consisted only of Bobby and Mr. Ferris, whipped from each hip pocket a huge blue-steel re-

volver, at the same time brushing back his coat to display his badge.

Those men might have fought Mr. Feeney's guns, but they had no mind to fight that badge, and they held back while Bobby and Mr. Ferris helped to calm Mr. Rubble by the simple expedient of sitting on him.

Three days later Bobby induced Messrs. Sharpe, Trimmer and all of their associates, without any difficulty whatever, to meet with him in the office of the mayor.

"Gentlemen of the Middle West Construction Company," said Bobby; "I am sorry to say that you are not telling the truth when you claim that you figured *in good faith* on this absurd and almost unknown three-tenths-inch scale, when all the others figured on the same drawings at one-fourth inch. The rescue of these prints, covered with Rubble's marginal figures, does not leave you a leg to stand on," and Bobby tapped his knuckles upon the charred-edged blueprints that lay unrolled on the desk before him. Fortunately the three inside prints were left fairly intact, and these were plainly marked one-fourth inch to the foot. "Moreover, rolled up inside the blueprints was even better evidence," went on Bobby; "evidence that Mr. Trimmer has perhaps forgotten. Nothing has been said about it until now, and noth-

ing has been published since we saved them from the fire."

From the drawer of his desk he drew several sheets of white paper. They were letter-heads of Trimmer and Company and were covered with Rubble's figures.

"Here's a note from Mr. Trimmer to Mr. Rubble, requesting him to prepare a statement showing the difference in cost *'between three-tenths and one-fourth.'* He does not say three-tenths or one-fourth what, but that is quite enough, taken in conjunction with these summaries on another sheet of paper. They are set down in two columns, one headed three-tenths and the other one-fourth. I have had Mr. Platt go over these figures, and he finds that the first number in one column exactly corresponds to the number of yards of excavating in this job when figured on the scale of three-tenths inch to the foot. The first number in the next column exactly corresponds to the excavating when figured at the one-fourth-inch scale. Every item will compare in the same manner: concrete, masonry, face-brick, and all. Now, if you chaps want to take this clumsy and almost laughable attempt at a steal into the courts I'm perfectly willing; but I should advise you not to do so."

Mr. Sharpe cleared his throat. He, the first one to declare that the Middle West would "go into court

and stand upon its rights," was now the first one to recant.

"I don't suppose it's worth while to contest the matter," he admitted. "We have no show with your administration, I see. We lose the contract and will step down and out quite peaceably; although there ought to be some arrangement by which we might get credit for the amount of work already done."

"No," declared Chalmers, with quite a reproving smile, "you may just keep on using the available part of it; for the point is that *you don't lose the contract!* You keep the contract, and you will build the power-house upon the original scale of one-fourth inch to the foot. Also you will carry out the rest of the work on the same basis as figured by other contractors. I want to remind you that you are well bonded, well financed, and that the city holds a guarantee of twenty per cent. of the contract price as a forfeit for the due and proper completion of this job."

"Why, it means bankruptcy!" shrieked Silas Trimmer, the deeply-graven circle about his mouth now being but the pallid and piteous caricature of his old-time sinister smile.

"That is precisely what I intend," retorted Bobby with a snap of his jaws. "I have long, long scores to settle with both of you gentlemen."

"But you haven't against the other members of

this company," protested Sharpe. "Our other stock-holders are entirely innocent parties."

"They have my sincere sympathy for being caught in such dubious company," replied Bobby with a contemptuous smile. "I happen to have a roster of your stock-holders, and every man of them has been mixed up in crooked deals in combination with Stone or Stone enterprises; so whatever they lose on this contract will be merely by way of restitution to the city."

"Look here, Mr. Burnit," said Sharpe, dropping his tone of remonstrance for one intended to be wheedling; "I know there are a number of financial matters between us that might have a tendency to make you vindictive. Now why can't we just get together nicely on all of these things and compromise?"

Chalmers rapped his knuckles sharply upon his desk.

"Kindly remember where you are," he warned.

"When I get around to settling day there will be no such thing as a compromise," declared Bobby with repressed anger. "I'll settle all those other matters in my own way and at my own time."

"One thing more, gentlemen," said Chalmers, as the chopfallen committee of the Middle West Construction Company rose to depart; "I wish to re-

mind you that there is a forfeit clause in your contract for delay, so I should advise you to resume operations at once. Mr. Platt succeeds the unfortunate Mr. Scales as constructing engineer, and he will see that the plans and specifications of the entire contract are carried out to the letter."

Platt, who had said nothing, walked away with Bobby.

"You were speaking about following the plans exactly, Mr. Burnit," he said when they were alone upon the street. "I find on an examination of the subsoil that there will be a few minor changes required. The runway, for instance, which goes down to the river northward from the power-house for the purpose of unloading coal barges, would be much better placed on the south side, away from the intake. There is practically no difference in expense, except that in running to the southward the riprap work will need to be carried about three feet deeper and with concreted walls, in place of being thrown loosely in the trenches as originally planned."

"All those things are up to you, Jimmy," said Bobby indifferently. "You must use your own judgment. Any changes of the sort that you deem necessary just bring before the city council, and I am quite sure that you can secure permission to make them."

"Very well," said Platt, and he left Bobby at the corner with a curious smile.

He was a different looking Jimmy Platt from the one Bobby had found in his office a week before. He was clean-shaven now, and his clothing was quite prosperous looking. Bobby, surmising the condition of affairs, had delicately insisted on making Platt a loan, to be repaid from his salary at a conveniently distant period, and the world looked very bright indeed to him.

The next day work on the new waterworks was resumed. In bitter consultation the Middle West Construction Company had discovered that they would lose less by fulfilling their contract than by forfeiting their twenty per cent., and they dispiritedly turned in again, kept constantly whipped up to the mark by Platt and by the knowledge that every day's non-completion of the work meant a heavy additional forfeit, which they had counted on being able to evade so long as the complaisant Mr. Scales was in charge.

CHAPTER XXIX

JIMMY PLATT ENJOYS THE HAPPIEST DAY OF HIS LIFE

THE straightening out of the waterworks matter left Bobby free to turn his attention to the local gas and electric situation. The *Bulletin*, since Bobby had defeated his political enemies, had been put upon a paying basis and was rapidly earning its way out of the debt that he had been compelled to incur for it; but the Brightlight Electric Company was a thorn in his side. Its only business now was the street illumination of twelve blocks, under a municipal contract which lost him money every month, and it had been a terrific task to keep it going.

The Consolidated Illuminating and Power Company, however, Bobby discovered by careful inquiry, was in even worse financial straits than the Brightlight. To its thirty millions of stock, mostly water, twenty more millions of water had been added, making a total organization of fifty million dollars; and the twenty million dollars' stock had been sold to the

public for ten million dollars, each purchaser of one share of preferred being given one share of common. As the preferred was to draw five per cent., this meant that two and one-half million dollars a year must be paid out in dividends. The salary roll of the company was enormous, and the number of non-working officers who drew extravagant stipends would have swamped any company. Comparing the two concerns, Bobby felt that in the Brightlight he had vastly the better property of the two, in that there was no water in it at its present half-million-dollar capitalization.

It was while pondering these matters that Bobby, dropping in at the Idlers' Club one dull night, found no one there but Silas Trimmer's son-in-law, the vapid and dissolute Clarence Smythe, which was a trifle worse than finding the place entirely deserted. To-night Clarence was in possession of what was known at the Idlers' as "one of Smythe's soggy buns," and despite countless snubs in the past he seized upon Bobby as a receptacle for his woes.

"I'm going to leave this town for good, Burnit!" he declared without any preliminaries, having waited so long to convey this startling and important information that salutations were entirely forgotten.

"For good! For whose good?" inquired Bobby.

"Mine," responded Clarence. "This town's gone

to the bow-wows. It's in the hands of a lot of pikers. There's no chance to make big money any more."

"Yes, I know," said Bobby dryly; "I had something to do with that, myself."

"It was a fine lot of muck-raking you did," charged Clarence. "Well, I'll give you another item for your paper. I have resigned from the Consolidated."

"It was cruel of you."

"It was time," said Clarence, ignoring the flippancy. "Something's going to drop over there."

Bobby smiled.

"It's always dropping," he agreed.

"This is the big drop," the other went on, with a wine-laden man's pride in the fact of possessing valuable secrets. "They're going to make a million-dollar bond issue."

"What for?" inquired Bobby.

"They need the money," chuckled Mr. Smythe. "Those city bonds, you know."

"What bonds?" demanded Bobby eagerly, but trying to speak nonchalantly.

Mr. Smythe suddenly realized the solemn gravity of his folly. Once more he was talking too much. Once more! It was a thing to weep over. "I'm a fool," he confessed in awe-stricken tones; "a rotten fool, Burnit. I'm ashamed to look anybody in the face. I'm ashamed——"

"It's highly commendable of you, I'm sure," Bobby agreed, and took his hasty leave before Clarence should begin to sob.

Immediately he called up Chalmers at his home.

"Chalmers," he demanded, "why must the Consolidated Illuminating and Power Company purchase city bonds?"

Chalmers laughed.

"Originally so Sam Stone could lend money to the Consumers' Electric. It is a part of their franchise, which is renewable at their option in ten-year periods, and which became a part of the Consolidated's property when the combine was effected. To insure 'faithful performance of contract,' for which clause every crooked municipality has a particular affection, they were to purchase a million dollars' worth of city bonds. Each year one hundred thousand dollars' worth were retired. In the tenth year, in renewing their franchise for the next ten years, they were compelled to renew also their million dollars of city bonds. These bonds they then used as collateral. Stone carried all that he could, at enormous usury, I understand, and let some of his banker friends in on the rest; and I suppose the banks paid him a rake-off. The ten-year period is up this fall, and their bonds are naturally retired; but, of course, they will renew."

"I'm not so sure about that," said Bobby. "Look up everything connected with it in the morning, and I'll see you at noon."

When they met the next day at noon, however, before Bobby could talk about the business in hand, Chalmers, with a suppressed smile, handed him a folded slip of paper.

Bobby examined that legal document—a dissolution of the injunction which had tied up a hundred and fifty thousand dollars in his bank for more than two years—with a sigh of relief.

"It seems," said Chalmers dryly, "that at the time you laid yourself liable to Madam Villenauve's breach-of-promise suit she had an undivorced husband living, Monsieur Villenauve complacently hiding himself in France and waiting for his share of the money. Let this be a lesson to you, young man."

Bobby hotly resented that grin.

"I'll swear to you, Chalmers," he asserted, "I never so much as thought of the woman except as a nuisance."

"I apologize, old man," said Chalmers. "But at least this will teach you not to back any more grand opera companies."

"I prefer to talk about the electric situation," said Bobby severely. "What have you found out about it?"

"That the Ebony Jewel Coal Company, a former Stone enterprise, has threatened suit against the Consolidated for their bill. The Consolidated is in a pinch and must raise money, not only to buy that allotment of the new waterworks bonds, but to meet the Ebony's and other pressing accounts. It must also float this bond issue, for it is likely to fall behind even on its salary list."

"Fine!" said Bobby. "I can see a lot of good citizens in this town holding stock in a bankrupt illuminating concern. Just watch this thing, will you, Chalmers? About this nice, lucky hundred and fifty thousand, we may count it as spent."

"What in?" asked Chalmers, smiling. "Do you think you can trust yourself with all that money?"

"Hush," said Bobby. "Don't breathe it aloud. I'm going to buy up all the Brightlight Electric stock I can find. It's too bad, Chalmers," he added with a grin, "that as mayor of the city you could not, with propriety, hold stock in this company," and although Chalmers tried to call him back Bobby did not wait. He was too busy, he said.

His business was to meet Agnes and Mrs. Elliston for luncheon down-town, and during the meal he happened to remark that Clarence Smythe had determined to shake the dust of the city from his feet.

"I thought so," declared Agnes. "Aunt Con-

stance, I'm afraid you'll have to finish your shopping without me. I must call upon Mrs. Smythe."

Mrs. Elliston frowned her disapproval, but she knew better than to protest. Before Agnes called upon Mrs. Smythe, however, she dropped in at the manufacturing concern of D. A. Elliston and Company.

"Uncle Dan, how much money of mine have you in charge just now?" she demanded to know.

"Cash? About five or six thousand."

"And how much more could you raise on my property?"

"Right away? About fifteen, on bonds and such securities. This is no time to sacrifice real estate."

"It isn't enough," said Agnes, frowning, and was silent for a time. "You'll just have to loan me about ten thousand more."

"Oh, will I?" he retorted. "What for?"

"I want to make an investment."

"So I judged," he dryly responded. "Well, young lady, as your steward I reckon I'll have to know something more about this investment before I turn over any money."

With sparkling eyes and blushes that would come in spite of her, she told him what she intended to do. When she had concluded, Dan Elliston slapped his knees in huge joy.

"You shall have all the money you want," he declared.

Upon that same afternoon Bobby started to buy up, here and there, nearly the entire stock of the Brightlight, purchasing it at an absurdly low price. Then he went to De Graff, to Dan Elliston, and to others to whose discretion he could trust. His own plans were well under way when the Consolidated Illuminating and Power Company announced, with a great flourish of trumpets, its new bond issue. The *Bulletin* made no comment upon this. It merely published the news fact briefly and concisely—an unexpected attitude, which brought surprise, then wonder, then suspicion to the office of the *Chronicle.* The *Chronicle* had been a Stone organ during the heydey of Stone's prosperity; the *Bulletin* had fought the Consolidated tooth and toe-nail; the already criminally overcapitalized Consolidated was about to float a new bond issue; the *Bulletin* did not fight this issue; *ergo,* the *Bulletin* must have something to gain by the issue.

The *Chronicle* waited three days, then began to fight the bond issue itself, which was precisely the effect for which Bobby had planned. Grown astute, Bobby realized that if the bond issue failed the Consolidated would go bankrupt at once instead of a year or so later. The newspaper, however, which would force that bankruptcy would, by that act, be the ap-

parent means of losing a vast amount of money to the poor investors of the town, and Bobby left that ungrateful task to the *Chronicle*. He even went so far as to defend the Consolidated in a mild sort of manner, a proceeding which fanned the *Chronicle* into fresh fury.

For three months desperate attempts were made by the Consolidated to make the new bonds attractive to the public, but less than one hundred thousand dollars was subscribed. Bobby was tabulating the known results of this subscription with much satisfaction one morning when Ferris walked into his office.

"I hope you didn't come into town to dig up another scandal, old man," said Bobby, greeting his contractor-friend with keen pleasure.

"No," said Ferris; "came in to give you a bit of news. The Great Eastern and Western Railroad wants to locate its shop here, and is building by private bid. I have secured the contract, subject to certain alterations of price for distance of hauling and difficulty of excavation; but the thing is liable to fall through for lack of a location. They can't get the piece of property they are after, and there is only one other one large enough and near enough to the city. The chief engineer and I are going out to look at it again to-day. Come with us. If we decide that the property will do, and if we can secure it, you may

have an exclusive news-item that would be very pretty, I should judge." And Ferris smiled at some secret joke.

"I'll go with pleasure," said Bobby, "and not by any means just for the news. When do you want to go?"

"Oh, right away, I guess. I'll telephone to Shepherd and have him order a rig."

"What's the use?" demanded Bobby, much interested. "My car's right within call. I'll have it brought up."

Shepherd, the chief engineer of the G. E. and W., when they picked him up at the hotel, proved to be an entire human being with red whiskers and not a care in the world. Bobby was enjoying a lot of preliminary persiflage when Shepherd incidentally mentioned their destination.

"It is known as Westmarsh," he observed. "I suppose you know where it is."

Bobby, who had already started the machine and had placed his hand on the steering wheel, gave a jerk so violent that he almost sent the machine diagonally across the street, and Ferris laughed aloud. His little joke was no longer a secret.

"Westmarsh!" Bobby repeated. "Why, I own that undrainable swamp."

"Swamp?" exclaimed Shepherd. "It's as dry as a

bone. I looked it over last night and am going out to-day to study the possible approaches to it."

"But you say it is dry!" protested Bobby, unable to believe it.

"Dry as powder," asserted Shepherd. "There has been an immense amount of water out there, but it has been well taken care of by the splendid drainage system that has been put in."

"It cost a lot of money to put in that drainage system," commented Bobby; "but we found it impracticable to drain an entire river."

It was Shepherd's turn to be puzzled, a process in which he stopped to laugh.

"This is the first time I ever heard an owner belittle his own property," he declared. "I suppose that next you'll only accept half the price we offer."

Bobby kept up his part of the conversation but feebly as they whirled out to the site of the old Applerod Addition. He was lost in speculation upon what could possibly have happened to that unfortunate swamp area. When they arrived, however, he was surprised to find that Shepherd had been correct. The ground, though sunken in places and black with the residue of one-time stagnant water, was firm enough to walk upon, and after many tests he even ran the machine across and across it. Moreover, grass and weeds, forcing their way here and there, were already

beginning to hide and redeem the ugly earthen surface.

Bobby surveyed the miracle in amazement. It was the first time he had seen the place in a year. Even in his trips to the waterworks site, which was just north, beyond the hill, he had chosen the longer and less solid river road rather than to come past this spot of humiliating memories.

"I can't understand it," he said again and again to the two men. "Why, Mr. Shepherd, I spent thousands of dollars in filling this swamp and draining it, with the idea of making a city subdivision here. Silas Trimmer, the man from whom I bought the place, imagined it to be fed by underground springs, but he let me spend a fortune to attract people out to see my new building lots so that he could, without cost, sell his own. That is his addition up there on the hills, and I'm glad to say he has recently mortgaged it for all that it will carry."

"How about the springs?" asked Shepherd with a frown. "Did you find them? You must have stopped them. Are they liable to break out again?"

"That's the worst of it," replied Bobby, still groping. "It wasn't springs at all. It was a peculiar geological formation, some disarranged strata leading beneath the hill from the river and emptying into the bottom of this pond. All through the year it seeped

in faster than our extensive drainings could carry it away, and in the spring and fall, when the river was high, it poured in. I don't see what could have happened. Suppose we run over and see the engineer who worked on this with me. He is now in charge of the new waterworks."

In five minutes they were over there. Jimmy Platt, out in his shirt-sleeves under a broad-brimmed straw hat, greeted them most cordially, but when Bobby explained to him the miracle that had happened to the old Applerod Addition, Platt laughed until the tears came into his eyes; and even after he stopped laughing there were traces of them there.

"Come down here and I'll show you," said he.

Leading south from the pumping station, diagonally down the steep bank to the river, had been built a splendid road, flanked on both sides by very solid, substantial-looking retaining walls.

"You see this wall?" asked Jimmy, pointing to the inside one. "It runs twenty feet below low-water level, and is solidly cemented. You remember when I got permission to move this road from the north side to the south side of the pumping station? I did that after an examination of the subsoil. This wall cuts off the natural siphon that fed the water to your Applerod Addition. I have been going past there in huge joy twice a day, watching that swamp dry up."

"In other words," said Bobby, "you have been doing a little private grafting on my account. How many additional dollars did that extra-deep wall cost?"

"I'm not going to tell you," asserted Jimmy stoutly. "It isn't very much, but whatever it is the city good and plenty owes you for saving it over a million on this job. But if I'd had to pay for it myself I would have done it to correct the mistake I made when I started to drain that swamp for you. I guess this is about the most satisfactory minute of my life," and he looked it.

"A fine piece of work," agreed Shepherd, casting a swift eye over the immense and busy waterworks site, and then glancing at the hill across which lay Bobby's property. "You're lucky to have had this chance, Mr. Platt," and he shook hands cordially with Jimmy. "I'm perfectly satisfied, Mr. Burnit. Do you want to sell that property?"

"If I can get out at a profit," replied Bobby. "Otherwise I'll regrade the thing and split it up into building lots as I originally intended."

"Let's go back down to the hotel and talk 'turkey,' " offered Shepherd briskly. "What do you think of the place, Ferris? Will it do?"

"Fine!" said Ferris. "The property lies so low that we won't have to cart away a single load of our

excavation. If we can only get a right-of-way through that natural approach to the northeast—"

"I think I can guarantee a right-of-way," interrupted Bobby, smiling, with his mind upon the city council which had been created by his own efforts.

"All right," said Shepherd. "We'll talk price until I have browbeaten you as low as you will go. Then I'll prepare a plat of the place and send it on to headquarters. You'll have an answer from them in three days."

As they whirred away Bobby's eyes happened to rest upon a young man and a young woman rowing idly down-stream in a skiff, and he smiled as he recognized Biff Bates and Nellie Platt.

On the day Bobby got the money for his Westmarsh property old Applerod came up from the office of the Brightlight Electric Company, where he held a lazy, sleepy afternoon job as "manager," and with an ingratiating smile handed Bobby a check for five thousand dollars.

"What's this for?" asked Bobby, puzzled.

"I have decided to give you back the money and take up again my approximate one-fifth share in the Applerod Addition," announced that gentleman complacently.

Bobby was entirely too much surprised at this to be amused.

"You're just a trifle too late, Mr. Applerod," said he. "Had you come to me two weeks ago, when I thought the land was worthless, out of common decency I would not have let you buy in again. Since then, however, I have sold the tract at a profit of forty thousand dollars."

"You have?" exclaimed Applerod. "I heard you were going to do something of the kind. I'm entitled to one-fifth of that profit, Mr. Burnit—eight thousand dollars."

"You're entitled to a good, swift poke in the neck!" exclaimed the voice of wizened old Johnson, who stood in the doorway, and who, since his friendship with Biff Bates, had absorbed some of that gentleman's vigorous vernacular. "Applerod, I'll give you just one minute to get out of this office. If you don't I'll throw you downstairs!"

"Mr. Johnson," said Applerod with great dignity, "this office does not belong to you. I have as much right here—"

Mr. Johnson, taking a trot around Bobby's desk so as to get Mr. Applerod between him and the door, made a threatening demonstration toward the rear, and Applerod, suddenly deserting his dignity, rushed out. Bobby straightened his face as Johnson, still blazing, came in from watching Applerod's ignominious retreat.

"Well, Johnson," said he, ignoring the incident as closed, "what can I do for you to-day?"

"Nothing!" snapped Johnson. "I have forgotten what I came for!" and going out he slammed the door behind him.

In the course of an hour Bobby was through with his morning allotment of mail and his daily consultation with Jolter, and then he called Johnson to his office.

"Johnson," said he, "I want you to do me a favor. There is one block of Brightlight stock that I have not yet bought up. It is in the hands of J. W. Williams, one of the old Stone crowd, who ought to be wanting money by this time. He holds one hundred shares, which you should be able to buy by now at fifty dollars a share. I want you to buy this stock in your own name, and I want to loan you five thousand dollars to do it with. I merely want voting power; so after you get it you may hold it if you like and still owe me the five thousand dollars, or I'll take it off your hands at any time you are tired of the obligation. You'd better go to Barrister and have him buy the stock for you."

"Yes, sir," said Johnson.

Bobby immediately went to De Graff.

"I came to subscribe for two hundred and fifty thousand dollars' worth of additional stock in the

New Brightlight. I have just deposited two hundred and eighty-five thousand dollars in your bank."

"You're becoming an expert," said De Graff with a quizzical smile. "With the million dollars' valuation at which we are to buy in the present Brightlight, the two hundred and fifty thousand subscribed for by Dan Elliston, and the ten thousand held by Miss Elliston, this new subscription about gives you control of the New Brightlight, don't it?"

"That's what I want," Bobby exulted. "You don't object, do you?"

"Not on my own account," De Graff assured him; "but you'd better have Barrister buy this in for you until we are organized. Then you can take it over."

"I guess you're right," agreed Bobby. "I'll send Barrister right over, and I think I shall make him take up the remaining ten thousand on his own account. A week from to-night is the council meeting at which the Consolidated must make good to renew their franchise, and we don't want any hitch in getting our final incorporation papers by that time. The members of the Consolidated are singing swan songs in seven simultaneous keys at this very moment."

Bobby's description of the condition of the Consolidated was scarcely exaggerated. It was a trying and a hopeless period for them. The bond issue had failed miserably. It had not needed the *Chronicle* to

remind the public of what a shaky proposition the Consolidated was, for Bobby had thoroughly exposed the corporation during the *Bulletin's* campaign against Sam Stone. Bond-floating companies from other cities were brought in, and after an examination of the books threw up their hands in horror at the crudest muddle they had ever found in any investigation of municipal affairs.

On the night of the council meeting, Sharpe and Trimmer and Williams, representing the Consolidated, were compelled to come before the council and confess their inability to take up the bonds required to renew their franchise; but they begged that this clause, since it was an entirely unnecessary one and was not enjoined upon gas or electric companies in other cities, be not enforced. Council, however, was obdurate, and the committee thereupon begged for a further extension of time in which to raise the necessary amount of money. Council still was obdurate, and by that obduracy the franchise of the Consumers' Electric Company, said franchise being controlled by the Consolidated Illuminating and Power Company, became null and void.

Thereupon Bobby Burnit, President De Graff and Dan Elliston, representing the New Brightlight Electric Company, recently organized for three million dollars, came forward and prayed for a franchise for

the electric lighting of the entire city, agreeing to take over the poles and wiring of the Consolidated at a fair valuation; and council was not at all obdurate, which was scarcely strange when one reflected that every member of that municipal body had been selected and put in place through the direct instrumentality of Bobby Burnit. It was practical politics, true enough, but Bobby had no qualms whatever about it.

"It may be quite true that I have not been actuated by any highly noble motives in this," he confessed to a hot charge by Williams, "but so long as in municipal affairs I am not actuated by any ignoble motives I am doing pretty fairly in this town."

There was just the bare trace of brutality in Bobby as he said this, and he suddenly recognized it in himself with dismay. What pity Bobby might have felt for these bankrupt men, however, was swept away in a gust of renewed aggressiveness when Trimmer, arousing himself from the ashen age which seemed all at once to be creeping over him, said, with a return of that old circular smile which had so often before aggravated Bobby:

"I am afraid I'll have to draw out of my other ventures and retire on my salary as president and manager of Trimmer and Company."

Vengefulness was in Bobby's eyes as he followed Trimmer's sprawling figure, so much like a bloated

spider's in its bigness of circumference and its attenuation of limbs, that suddenly he shuddered and turned away as when one finds oneself about to step upon a toad.

CHAPTER XXX

IN WHICH, BEING THE LAST CHAPTER, EVERYTHING TURNS OUT RIGHT, AND EVERYBODY GETS MARRIED

AT the offices of the New Brightlight Electric Company there was universal rejoicing. Johnson was removed from the *Bulletin* to take charge of the new organization until it should be completed, and Bobby himself, for a few days, was compelled to spend most of his time there. During the first week after the granting of the franchise Bobby called Johnson to him.

"Mr. Johnson," said he quite severely, "you have been so careful and so faithful in all other things that I dislike to remind you of an overlooked duty."

"I am sorry, sir," said Johnson. "What is it?"

"You have neglected to make out a note for that five-thousand-dollar loan. Kindly draw it up now, payable in ten years, with interest at four per cent. *after* the date of maturity."

"But, sir," stammered Johnson, "the stock is worth par now."

"Would you like to keep it?"

"I'd be a fool to say I wouldn't, sir. But the stock is not only worth par,—it was worth that in the old Brightlight; and I received an exchange of two for one in the New Brightlight, which is also worth par this morning; so I hold twenty thousand dollars' worth of stock."

"It cost me five thousand," insisted Bobby, "and we'll settle at that figure."

"I don't know how to thank you, sir," trembled Johnson, but he stiffened immediately as Applerod intruded himself into the room with a bundle of papers which he laid upon the desk.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Burnit," began Applerod, "but I have five thousand dollars I'd like to invest in the New Brightlight Company if you could manage it for me."

"I'm sorry, Applerod," said Bobby, "but there isn't a share for sale. It was subscribed to the full capitalization before the incorporation papers were issued."

Applerod was about to leave the room in deep dejection when Johnson, with a sudden happy inspiration, called him back.

"I think I know where you can buy five thousand," said Johnson; "but you will have to hurry to get it."

"Where?" asked Applerod eagerly, while Bobby went to the window to conceal his broad smiles.

"Just put on your hat and go right over to Barrister," directed Johnson; "and take a blank check with you. I'll telephone him, to save time for you. The stock is worth par, and that lonesome fifty shares will be snapped up before you know it."

"You will excuse me till I go up-town, Mr. Burnit?" inquired Applerod, and bustled out eagerly.

He had no sooner left the building than Johnson grabbed Bobby's telephone and called up Barrister.

"This is Johnson," he said to the old attorney. "I have just sent Applerod over to you to buy fifty shares of New Brightlight at par. Take his check and hold it for delivery of the stock. I'll have it over to you within an hour, or as soon as I can have the transfer made. It is my stock, but I don't want him to know it."

Hanging up the receiver old Johnson sat in the chair by Bobby's desk and his thin shoulders heaved with laughter.

"Applerod will be plumb crazy when he finds that out," he said. "To think that I have fifteen thousand dollars' worth of this good stock that didn't cost me a cent, all paid for with Applerod's own five thousand dollars!"

Johnson laughed so hard that finally he was compelled to lay his head on the desk in front of him, with his lean old fingers over his eyes.

"Thanks to you, Robert; thanks to you," he added after a little silence.

Bobby, turning from the window, saw the thin shoulders still heaving. There was a glint of moisture on the lean hands that had toiled for so many years in the Burnit service, and as Bobby passed he placed his hand on old Johnson's bowed head for just an instant, then went out, leaving Johnson alone.

It was Applerod who, returning triumphantly with Barrister's promise of the precious block of New Brightlight for delivery in the afternoon, brought Bobby a copy of his own paper containing so much startling news that the front page consisted only of a hysteria of head-lines. Sudden proceedings in bankruptcy had been filed against the Consolidated Illuminating and Power Company. These proceedings had revealed the fact that Frank L. Sharpe, supposed to have left the city on business for the company, had in reality disappeared with the entire cash balance of the Consolidated. This disappearance had immediately thrust the Middle West Construction Company into bankruptcy. By Stone's own acts the Stone enterprises had crumpled and fallen, and all his adherents were ruined.

Out of the chaos that the startling facts he was able to glean created in Bobby's mind there came a thought of Ferris, and he immediately telephoned him,

out at the site of the new G. E. and W. shops, where ground was already being broken, that he would be out that way.

Half an hour later he took Ferris into his machine and they whirled over to the waterworks site, where the work had stopped as abruptly as if that scene of animation had suddenly been stricken of a plague and died. On the way Bobby explained to Ferris what had happened.

"You were the lowest legitimate bidder on the job, I believe," he concluded.

"Yes, outside of the local company."

"If I were you I'd get busy with Jimmy Platt on an estimate of the work already done," suggested Bobby. "I think it very likely that the city council will offer the Keystone Construction Company the contract at its former figure, with the proper deductions for present progress. We will make up the difference between their bid and yours, and whatever loss there is in taking up the work will come out of the forfeit put up by the Middle West Company."

Jimmy Platt ran out to meet them like a lost soul. The waterworks project had become his pet. He lived with it and dreamed of it, and that there was a prospect of resuming work, and under such skilful supervision as that of Ferris, delighted him. While Jimmy and Mr. Ferris went into the office to prepare a basis

of estimating, Bobby stayed behind to examine the carbureter of his machine, which had been acting suspiciously on the way out, and while he was engaged in this task a voice that he knew quite well saluted him with:

"Fine work, old pal! I guess you put all your lemons into the squeezer and got the juice, eh?"

Biff had a copy of the *Bulletin* in his hand, which was sufficient explanation of his congratulations.

"Things do seem to be turning out pretty lucky for me, Biff," Bobby confessed, and then, looking at Mr. Bates, he immediately apologized. "I beg pardon for calling you Biff," said he. "I should have said Mr. Bates."

"Cut it!" growled Biff, looking himself over with some complacency nevertheless.

From his nice new derby, which replaced the slouch cap he had always preferred, to his neat and uncomfortably-pointed gun-metal leathers which had supplanted the broad-toed tans, Mr. Bates was an epitome of neatly-pressed grooming. White cuffs edged the sleeves of his gray business suit, and—wonder of wonders!—he wore a white shirt with a white collar, in which there was tied a neat bow of—last wonder of all—modest gray!

"I suppose that costume is due to distinctly feminine influence, eh, Biff?"

"Guilty as Cassie Chadwick!" replied Biff with a sheepish grin. "She's tryin' to civilize me."

"Who is?" demanded Bobby.

"Oh, *she* is. You know who I mean. Why, she's even taught me to cut out slang. Say, Bobby, I didn't know how much like a rough-neck I used to talk. I never opened my yawp but what I spilled a line of fricasseed gab so twisted and frazzled and shredded you could use it to stuff sofa-cushions; but now I've handed that string of talk the screw number. No more slang for your Uncle Biff."

"I'm glad you have quit it," approved Bobby soberly. "I suppose the next thing I'll hear will be the wedding bells."

"No!" Biff denied in a tone so pained and shocked that Bobby looked up in surprise to see his face gone pale. "Don't talk about that, Bobby. Why, I wouldn't dare even think of it myself. I—I never think about it. Me? with a mitt like a picnic ham? Did you ever see her hand, Bobby? And her eyes and her hair and all? Why, Bobby, if I'd ever catch myself daring to think about marrying that girl I'd take myself by the Adam's apple and give myself the damnedest choking that ever turned a mutt's map purple."

"I'm sorry, after all, that you are through with slang, Biff," said Bobby, "because if you were still using it you might have expressed that idea so much

more picturesquely;" but Biff did not hear him, for from the office came Nellie Platt with a sun-hat in her hand.

"Right on time," she said gaily to Biff, and, with a pleasant word for Bobby, went down with Mr. Bates to the river bank, where lay the neat little skiff that Jimmy had bought for her.

Bobby and Ferris and Platt, standing up near the filters, later on, were startled by a scream from the river, and, turning, they saw the skiff, in mid-stream, struck by a passing steamer and splintered as if it were made of pasteboard. Nellie had been rowing. Biff had called her attention to the approaching steamer, across the path of which they were passing. There had been plenty of time to row out of the way of it, but Nellie in grasping her oar for a quick turn had lost it. Fortunately the engines had been stopped immediately when the pilot had seen that they must strike, so that there was no appreciable underdrag. Biff's head had been grazed slightly, enough to daze him for an instant, but he held himself up mechanically. Nellie, clogged by her skirts, could not swim, and as Biff got his bearings he saw her close by him going down for the second time. Two men sprang from the lower deck of the steamer, but Biff reached her first, and, his senses instantly clearing as he caught her, he struck out for the shore.

The three men on shore immediately ran down the bank, and sprang into the water to help Biff out with his burden. He was pale, but strangely cool and collected.

"Don't go at it that way!" he called to them savagely, knowing neither friend nor foe in this emergency. "Get her loosened up someway, can't you?"

Without waiting on them, Biff ripped a knife from his pocket, opened it and slit through waist and skirt-band and whatever else intervened, to her corset, which he opened with big fingers, the sudden deftness of which was marvelous. Directing them with crisp, sharp commands, he guided them through the first steps toward resuscitation, and then began the slow, careful pumping of the arms that should force breath back into the closed lungs.

For twenty minutes, each of which seemed interminable, Jimmy and Biff worked, one on either side of her, Biff's face set, cold, expressionless, until at last there was a flutter of the eyelids, a cry of distress as the lungs took up their interrupted function, then the sharp, hissing sound of the intake and outgo of natural, though labored, breath; then Nellie Platt opened her big, brown eyes and gazed up into the gray ones of Biff Bates. She faintly smiled; then Biff did a thing that he had never done before in his mature life. He suddenly broke down and cried aloud, sobbing in

great sobs that shook him from head to foot and that hurt him, as they tore from his throat, as the first breath of new life had hurt Nellie Platt; and, seeing and understanding, she raised up one weak arm and slipped it about his neck.

It was about a week after this occurrence when Silas Trimmer, coming back from lunch to attend the annual stock-holders' meeting of Trimmer and Company, stopped on the sidewalk to inspect, with some curiosity, a strange, boxlike-looking structure which leaned face downward upon the edge of the curbing. It was three feet wide and full sixty feet long. He stooped and tried to tilt it up, but it was too heavy for his enfeebled frame, and with another curious glance at it he went into the store.

The meeting was set for half-past two. It was now scarcely two, and yet, when he opened the door of his private office, which had been set apart for that day's meeting, he was surprised at the number of people he found in the room. A quick recognition of them mystified him the more. They were Bobby Burnit and Agnes, Johnson, Applerod and Chalmers.

"I came a little early, Mr. Trimmer," said Bobby, in a polite conversational tone, "to have these three hundred shares transferred upon the books of Trimmer and Company, before the stock-holders' meeting convenes."

"What shares are they?" inquired Silas in a voice grown strangely shrill and metallic.

"The stock that was previously controlled by your son-in-law, Mr. Clarence Smythe. Miss Elliston bought them last week from your daughter, with the full consent of your son-in-law."

"The dog!" Trimmer managed to gasp, and his fingers clutched convulsively.

"Possibly," admitted Bobby dryly. "At any rate he has had to leave town, and I do not think you will be bothered with him any more. In the meantime, Mr. Trimmer, I'd like to call your attention to a few very interesting figures. When you urged me, four years ago, to consolidate the John Burnit and Trimmer and Company Stores, my father's business was appraised at two hundred and sixty thousand dollars and yours at two hundred and forty. On your suggestion we took in sixty thousand dollars of additional capital. I did not know as much at that time as I do now, and I let you sell this stock where you could control it, virtually giving you three thousand shares to my two thousand six hundred. You froze me out, elected your own board, made yourself manager at an enormous salary, and voted your son-in-law another one so ridiculous that it was put out of all possibility for my stock ever to yield any dividends. All right, Mr. Trimmer. With the purchase of this three hundred

shares I now control two thousand nine hundred shares and you two thousand seven hundred. I presume I don't need to tell you what is going to happen in to-day's meeting."

To this Silas returned no answer.

"I am an old man," he muttered to himself as one suddenly stricken. "I am an old, old man."

"I am going to oust you," continued Bobby, "and to oust all your relatives from their fat positions; and I am going to elect myself to everything worth while. I have brought Mr. Johnson with me to inspect your books, and Mr. Chalmers to take charge of certain legal matters connected with the concern immediately after the close of to-day's meeting. I am going to restore Applerod to his position here from which you so unceremoniously discharged him, and make Johnson general manager of this and all my affairs. I understand that your stock in this concern is mortgaged, and that you will be utterly unable to redeem it. I intend to buy it and practically own the entire company myself. Are there any questions you would like to ask, Mr. Trimmer?"

There was none. Silas, crushed and dazed and pitiable, only moaned that he was an old man; that he was an old, old man.

Bobby felt the gentle pressure of Agnes' hand upon his arm. There was a moment of silence.

Trimmer looked around at them piteously. Once more Bobby felt that touch upon his sleeve. Understanding, he went over to Silas and took him gently by the arm.

"Come over here to the window with me a minute," said he, "and we will have a little business talk."

"Business! Oh, yes; business!" said Silas, brightening up at the mention of the word.

He rose nervously and allowed Bobby to lead him, bent and almost palsied, over to the window, where they could look out on the busy street below, and the roofs of the tall buildings, and the blue sky beyond where it smiled down upon the river. It was only a fleeting glance that Silas Trimmer cast at the familiar scene outside, and almost immediately he turned to Bobby, clutching his coat sleeve eagerly. "You—you said something about business," he half-whispered, and over his face there came a shadow of that old, shrewd look.

"Why, yes," replied Bobby uncomfortably. "I think we can find a place for you, Mr. Trimmer. You have kept this concern up splendidly, no matter how much beset you were outside, and—and I think Johnson will engage you, if you care for it, to look after certain details of buying and such matters as that."

"Oh, yes, the buying," agreed Silas, nodding his head. "I always was a good buyer—and a good seller,

too!" and he chuckled. "About what do you say, now, that my services would be worth?" and with the prospect of bartering more of his old self came back.

"We'll make that satisfactory, I can assure you," said Bobby. "Your salary will be a very liberal one, I am certain, and it will begin from to-day. First, however, you must have a good rest—a vacation with pay, understand—and it will make you strong again. You are a little run down."

"Yes," agreed Silas, nodding his head as the animation faded out of his eyes. "I'm getting old. I think, Mr. Burnit, if you don't mind I'll go into the little room there and lie on the couch for a few minutes."

"That is a good idea," said Bobby. "You should be rested for the meeting."

"Oh, yes," repeated Silas, nodding his head sagely; "the meeting."

They were uncomfortably silent when Bobby had returned from the little room adjoining. The shadow of tragedy lay upon them all, and it was out of this shadow that Bobby spoke his determination.

"I am going to get out of business," he declared. "It is a hard, hard game. I can win at it, but—well, I'd rather go back, if I only could, to my unsophistication of four years ago. I don't like business. Of course, I'll keep this place for tradition's sake, and because it would please my father—no, I mean it *will*

please him—but I'm going to sell the *Bulletin*. I have an offer for it at an excellent profit. I'm going to intrust the management of the electric plant to my good friend Biff, here, with Chalmers and Johnson as starboard and larboard bulwarks, until the stock is quoted at a high enough rating to be a profitable sale; then I'm going to turn it into money, and add it to the original fund. I think I shall be busy enough just looking after and enjoying my new partnership," and he smiled down at Agnes, who smiled back at him with a trusting admiration that needed no words to express.

"Beg your pardon, sir," said old Johnson, "but I have a letter here for you," and from his inside pocket he drew one of the familiar steel-gray envelopes, which he handed to Bobby.

It was addressed:

To My Son Bobby, Upon His Regaining His Father's Business

The message inside was so brief that one who had not known well old John Burnit would never have known the full, full heart out of which he penned it:

"I knew you'd do it, dear boy. Whatever mystery I find in the great hereafter I shall be satisfied—for I knew you'd do it."

That was all.

"Johnson," said Bobby, crumpling up the letter in his hand, and speaking briskly to beat back his emotion, "we will move our offices to the same old quarters, and we will move back, for my use, my father's old desk with my father's portrait hanging above it, just as they were when Silas Trimmer ordered them removed."

Two of the stock-holders came in at this moment, and Agnes went down into the store to find Biff Bates and Nellie Platt, for there was much shopping to do. Agnes had taken pretty Nellie under her chaperonage, and every day now the girls were busy with preparations for certain events in which each was highly interested.

Up in the office there was a meeting that was a shock to all the stock-holders but one, and after it was over Bobby joined the shoppers. When the four of them had clambered into Bobby's automobile and were rolling away, Bobby stopped his machine.

"Look," he said in calm triumph, and pointed upward, his hand clasping a smaller hand which was to rest contentedly in his through life.

Over the Grand Street front of the building from which they had emerged, workmen were just raising a huge electric sign, and it bore the legend:

THE JOHN BURNIT'S SON STORES

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